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LESS BLACK THAN WE'RE PAINTED

BY JAMES PAYN

AUTHOR OF "LOST SIR MASSINGBERD," "WHAT HE COST HER," "FALLEN
FORTUNES," "BY PROXY," ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

London
CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1878

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"After all, man is man; he is not wicked, and he is not good; by no means white as snow, but by no means black as coal; black *and* white, piebald, striped, dubious."—SWINBURNE.

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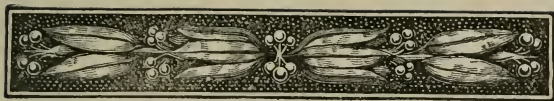
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*LESS BLACK THAN WE'RE
PAINTED.*

CHAPTER I.

OIL ON THE WATERS.

DICK's blood was up, and he felt equal to anything ; but he had a little over-rated his moral courage. On his way downstairs he met Miss Latour, and the manner in which she had gathered up her skirts to avoid the contagion of his touch, and also cut him dead at the same moment, staggered him not a little. To venture into old Mr. Pole's sanctum, when he had got a fit of the gout upon him, was also no trifling undertaking, even if he had been bound upon

a more pleasant errand. That fine old English gentleman was not only 'greatly respected,' but (especially under the influence of his aristocratic malady) intensely feared. It was not necessary (and would have been very dangerous) to 'scratch' him in order to find he was a Tartar; and being well acquainted with this circumstance, it was with a somewhat faltering hand that Mr. Richard Talbot knocked at his host's study-door.

'Come in, and be d——d to you!' was the invitation to his summons, and its tone was that of a ship-captain's in a gale of wind.

Why the private apartment of the proprietor of Masham Manor was called a 'study,' is a question for etymologists. It had a little book-shelf, with the '*Sporting Calendar*' arranged in rows and a backgammon board with 'Rapin's History' on the back of it; so far and no further its connection with literature extended. On the walls hung a few illustrations of fox-hunting, with some lines from Somerville's

'Chase' beneath them, which it is probable he had never read ; and there ended art and poetry. Above the mantelpiece there were a fine collection of 'cups,' and one especial dogwhip, which its proprietor humorously (if somewhat sacrilegiously) termed 'Simon the Tanner.' Among these were arranged certain fox's brushes, with the date on which they had been obtained—mementos of the Squire's palmy days, when he could procure horses up to his weight. The low-roofed room was otherwise without ornament ; but it was substantially furnished and very snug, with an aroma of tobacco smoke about it not unpleasant to the majority of the Squire's friends, but with which the vassals of the estate too often learnt to associate the country gaol and its treadmill. For the Squire's study was also the court in which his after-dinner justice was administered to poachers and other rustic offenders. The present would not have been a good day for any culprit to have been brought before him, for he was sitting in his colossal

arm-chair very uneasily, and with his foot swaddled in flannel, supported on a gout-rest of red baize. In his hand was 'Tom and Bob's Life in London,' a work in which he took an unwearied interest, and in the perusal of which he hated to be interrupted. Some people, especially the ladies, called him a 'naughty man,' and in accordance with that theory of his character pictured him in his solitude perusing French novels of an immoral tendency; but this was mere scandal. Mr. Pole had never learned French.

'Well, Master Dick, and what is *your* business?' inquired the old gentleman with undisguised irritation.

'I am very sorry to disturb you,' said the young gentleman gently; 'but something has happened to-day at once so serious and distressing——'

'*Not* to the Aylesbury ducks!' exclaimed the other in a tone like the roar of a lioness who beheld her cubs in danger; 'you don't mean to say the cook has kept them a day too long?'

—
‘Not that I am aware of,’ replied Richard.
‘The matter I came to speak of is a personal one, and concerns myself only.’

‘All right,’ returned the old gentleman with a sigh of relief; ‘why the deuce did you put me out by looking so miserable? I thought something had happened of consequence.’

‘It concerns, however, my own honour, and the relation in which I stand to you and yours, Mr. Pole,’ observed Dick, with grave asperity.

‘Very good: just squeeze that lemon, and open some soda-water, will you?’ Dick obeyed, without protest, except what was conveyed by the expression of his face; it was impossible to begin discussing a delicate point of conduct, while engaged in opening a bottle of soda-water, so he did that first.

‘We had a picnic on Swanborough Hill to-day, sir, as you are probably aware.’

‘Of course I am; precious set of fools you were, in my opinion, when you could have had your meals comfortably cooked

at home—just move my leg-rest half an inch nearer the fire. Steady. That's right.'

'Sir, a very painful circumstance took place at that picnic. A young lady in whom I feel the warmest interest met me on the hill by appointment.'

'*Did* she? Well, 'pon my life, you're beginning early.'

'But, sir, I am here to explain matters and excuse myself.'

'Excuse yourself! Then she was not good-looking, I suppose. Well, at your age I was not particular myself—just put that bit of flannel—gingerly—over my foot, will you? It must be near dinner-time. You were saying something about a girl, but she was not pretty. That is like Tom and Bob here without the illustrations; it interests nobody.'

'But, sir, this young lady is very pretty. I never saw any one half so pretty, and she is also as good as gold.'

'What do you mean? Has she got land in her own right? Oh, I see; you

are referring to her moral qualities. Well, you met this pretty girl, who has moral qualities, by appointment on Swanborough, Hill—and kissed her.'

'Well, yes, sir, I did kiss her,' admitted Dick. 'It was on the top of the hill——'

'That was very wrong,' interrupted the old gentleman. 'There is a place in the gully, called the Lovers' Walk, very much better fitted for that operation.'

'I *know*, sir,' said Dick naïvely. 'But I was wishing her good-bye; and there was nothing within sight but the camera obscura?'

'Well, go on. You are coming to something interesting at last, I hope. You took her into the camera obscura?'

'No, sir; indeed I did not. But, unhappily, Miss Pole was there already.'

'The devil she was. Who *with*?' roared the old gentleman.

'Well, sir, with Miss Latour and Miss Meredith, and others. And unfortunately, though I could not see them, they could see *me*.'

‘What, on that little white table? They saw you billing and cooing—you and the young woman—oh, dear—pat me on the back, you scoundrel.’ The old gentleman’s huge frame shook with laughter, and he was purple in the face—‘saw you billing and cooing. Oh, dear; and Miss Latour too. It must have been quite a revelation to her. It is the best thing I have heard these many days.’

‘But, sir, they are very angry, and Miss Latour especially. The ladies consider that they have been insulted.’

‘And so they have, sir,’ broke in Mr. Pole, suddenly awaking to his responsibilities; ‘of course they have been insulted. How dare you insult the ladies of my family by courting this brazen-faced creature under their very eyes? If I wasn’t stuck to my chair by this confounded gout—damme, I’ll send for Henry to bring a horsewhip,’ and he laid his hand upon the bell.

‘One moment, Mr. Pole, before you disgrace me—and yourself—before all the

world,' cried Richard desperately. 'This brazen-faced creature, as you call her, is as honest a girl as breathes. I have known her all my life, and am engaged to be married to her. Nobody knows it but yourself; but I feel it due to you and the ladies to confess as much.'

'Engaged to be married! *You?* Engaged to your grandmother! Why, you're only just out of the nursery. Who's the girl?'

'Her name is Lindon, sir.'

'Lindon, Lindon; I never heard of it. Where does she live? Who is her father?'

'Her father is dead, sir. She lives in our parish. Her mother was my foster-mother.'

'What, the woman that married that infernal poacher whom your father made his gamekeeper? Then I must say he's properly served for it. So you are going to marry your father's gamekeeper's step-daughter. You'll find that is among the "forbidden degrees," my young friend.'

‘ I dare say there will be objections, sir,’ said Richard firmly ; ‘ but I mean to do it.’

‘ Do you, begad ? Just ring that bell, will you ? If you move a step I’ll throw my crutch at you. John, send Mr. Henry here.’

‘ It is none of Henry’s business, sir,’ pleaded Dick.

‘ Certainly not ; but it’s *my* business. I have not forgotten that I was your father’s friend till he ratted from the cause of good-fellowship and took up with his blessed “isms.” You shall not disgrace him by running away with a poacher’s daughter from *my* house. If he has any sense left in him, he will send you out of the country till your step-father elect is hung.’

‘ That would make no difference to *me*,’ said Richard stolidly.

‘ I dare say not. If that girl were here I’d send her to gaol for an attempt at kidnapping. Henry, here’s Dick Talbot engaged to be married !’

The young man, who had hastened to obey his grandfather’s summons, expecting

to find that some catastrophe had happened, stared inquiringly from one to the other.

‘What Mr. Pole says is quite true,’ said Dick with dignity. ‘The young lady I met on the hill is my affianced bride.’

Here the old gentleman began to shake again.

‘What!’ said Henry, ‘you are going to marry the girl with the peacock’s feather in her hat?’

‘It was not a peacock’s feather,’ answered Richard angrily, ‘and even if it was, that is no business of yours. I have made this explanation for your sister’s sake and for that of the other ladies. The matter is sufficiently painful to me as it is, without its subjecting me and the girl I love to insult.’

‘I sincerely beg your pardon, Talbot,’ cried Henry Pole; ‘but——’ Here he caught sight of his grandfather’s face, and its expression was too much for him. They roared together like an old lion and a young one over some dainty morsel.

‘I will not stay another hour under this roof,’ cried Richard, turning majestically towards the door.

‘Don’t let him go alone,’ spluttered the old gentleman. ‘Get the dog-cart out, and drive him over to Durnton yourself, Henry. Never lose sight of him till you see him safe at the Tower. I’ll write by post to his father.’

‘I will not run away,’ said Richard quietly. ‘I am willing enough to go home.’

This seemed, in fact, to poor Dick the best thing to be done. To stop at Masham, exposed to the ridicule of his young friends, was impossible : and it was better that his father should learn his views from his own lips than from Mr. Pole’s version of them. He went up to his room at once and locked himself in, to pack his portmanteau ; he would not even speak to his friend Greene.

While the dog-cart was being got ready, Henry Pole waited in the hall ; through which presently sailed Miss Latour, in still

majestic fashion, like a swan who has been ruffled by intrusion and can't forget it.

'So Mr. Talbot is going, I'm truly pleased to hear.'

'Yes, he's going; but you're all of you quite wrong about him, and you, Miss Latour, in particular.'

'What *do* you mean? It is a matter on which, unfortunately, there can be no mistake.'

'I beg your pardon. It was only yesterday that you said he was not a marrying man.'

'Why, you don't mean to say that——'

'Yes; he's engaged to the young lady with the eagle's plume—I mean with the bird of paradise feather.'

'Engaged! That boy *engaged*!'

'Hush, here he comes.'

Miss Latour had been bound for the housekeeper's room, but she tacked at once, and sailed off to the ladies' boudoir.

No engagement had ever caused such excitement at Masham Hall since the news had come of the battle of Waterloo. The

ladies were at once reassured and horrified. In one sense, they had made a great fuss about nothing : though in another, the 'nothing' assumed gigantic proportions. Mr. Greene stuck loyally to his friend : 'I was quite sure,' he said, 'that Talbot could have done nothing unbecoming a gentleman.'

'And yet,' said Miss Latour, 'appearances, you will allow, were much against the young man ; we could not have done otherwise than exhibit our marked disapprobation.'

'I suppose not,' said Mr. Greene, 'though it was like sending a fire-engine to put out an aurora borealis.'



CHAPTER II.

STICKING TO IT.

IT was not, as we know, the first time, nor yet the second, that Mr. Richard Talbot had come home in disgrace, when he drove up to the Tower with Henry Pole by his side, like a criminal in charge of a detective; and yet he felt less apprehension about the consequences of his misconduct on this occasion than he had ever done before. Hitherto, he had not been able to persuade even himself that he had been undeserving of punishment; whereas he was now fortified by a sense of innocence. He was like a spendthrift, who has for once lent a guinea to some honest fellow, and finds himself in the proud position of

a creditor. He had done nothing, as he kept repeating to himself, that he had need to be ashamed of; and moreover (and this, above all, gave him strength and confidence), what he had done he meant to stick to.

Henry Pole, though he hated 'rows,' had good-naturedly offered to stay the night at the Tower, and 'see Dick through' the interview with his father; but the young gentleman had declined his services, so his friend just dropped him at the hall-door, and then turned his horse's head towards home again.

'Why should I be afraid of the governor?' was Dick's reflection; 'this row must have come sooner or later, and why not at once. Wild horses shall never tear me from Lucy's arms.'

Perhaps he secretly imagined that he would be likely to get there all the earlier if there should be a really serious quarrel. If he was kicked out of house and home, for example, it would be only natural that he should repair to Ford's Alley. He did

not, however, believe that matters would proceed to that extremity, and had some private doubts, even if they did, whether Miss Lindon would be ready upon the instant to link her fortunes with his own under such disadvantageous circumstances. He felt secure of her affection, but was also aware that she was no slave of impulse, but had behind her an indomitable will and—that teak which makes the iron target so impregnable—a prudent disposition. Though her motto with respect to him was always ‘I love you,’ it had been ever supplemented with ‘Watch and wait.’ She trusted to time (and to herself) to help them, and would be strongly averse he knew to any *coup de main*. In the discussion that was about to ensue, Mr. Talbot the elder little guessed how his own arguments were strengthened by the views of the very young lady who was the object of his hostility.

‘Your father is in the library, Mr. Richard,’ said Rawden, in answer to Dick’s inquiry.

‘ Alone ?’

‘ Well, sir, he has only Mr. Freeman with him.’

Mr. Rawden could scarcely believe his ears, but if he did not hear his young master exclaim, ‘ D—— Mr. Freeman,’ as he ran in, he was the victim of an acoustic delusion.

The sentiment was incredible, but the expression remained distinct upon his tympanum. If the porter of the Vatican had let in one of the Pope’s nephews, and heard him say ‘ D—— the Pope,’ his position would have been exactly analogous to that of Mr. Rawden. His exclamation of ‘ Well, I never !’ however inaccurate grammatically, was strictly true. For although Mr. Freeman condemned other people *in futuro* both on Sundays and week days, and that with no uncertain voice, no one in Durnton, and far less at the Tower, had ever ventured to thus anathematise Mr. Freeman.

Disgusted as Dick was not to find his father alone, he could not keep him in

ignorance of his arrival, and having once resolved to make a clean breast of it, he doubtless felt that the sooner it was done the better, and therefore pushed on into the library. His father, as usual, had a huge tome of divinity in his hand, to some passage in which he was directing the Rector's attention. He looked up, ag-grieved at the interruption.

‘What, Richard!—back so soon?’ he said.

It was not a gracious speech; but the manner of his reception seemed to make what the young man had to tell more easy for him; a tone of tenderness would have gone far to melt his resolution.

‘Yes, sir, I am come back.’

‘Tired of Masham already, eh?’ said the Rector, kindly. ‘That is scarcely complimentary to the young ladies.’

‘Mr. Pole has sent me home, father,’ stammered Dick.

‘Not in disgrace, Richard, I hope, *again?*’

‘No, sir; I have done nothing to be

ashamed of—only—only—I am engaged to be married.'

'To be *what*?' inquired Mr. Talbot, dropping his book upon the floor with a crash.

'He *said* to be married,' said the Rector. 'Well, he's very young, of course, but I must say my wife foresaw it. "You may depend upon it," she said, "that Richard will make a match of it with Margaret Pole."'

'It is not Margaret Pole at all,' observed the young man with irritation; 'it's Lucy Lindon.'

The Rector thought to himself, 'My wife said he would do that too;' but this time he did not claim credit for her sagacity; he only murmured, 'Then Dorothy was right after all.'

'And who on earth is Lucy Lindon?' inquired Mr. Talbot.

Dick did not reply, but fixed his eyes stolidly upon the carpet. He had over-rated his courage.

'I am afraid,' said the Rector, answering

for him, 'that the young person of whom Richard speaks is Mrs. Parkes' daughter.'

'I know no one called Parkes except my gamekeeper and his wife,' observed Mr. Talbot, coldly.

There was a very unpleasant silence.

'Am I to understand,' continued Mr. Talbot, more icily than before, 'that the object of your proposed engagement, Richard, is my gamekeeper's daughter?'

'It is his step-daughter, sir,' exclaimed Dick, with desperation; he had never comprehended the difficulties of his position until now; the unwonted silence of the Rector quite as much as the austere tones of his father, brought home to him the magnitude of his offence against society. 'She is quite different from George, sir,' he urged, 'and not of his blood. She is a well-conducted and excellent young woman. (He did not dare to say 'young lady'; and yet he felt that he was only giving the sort of good character that would be looked for in a housemaid—one that by no means fitted the bride-elect of the heir of Talbot

Tower.) ‘She is also very accomplished, sir, as my Aunt Edith will bear witness.’

‘Your Aunt Edith?’ put in his father quickly, at the same time shooting a meaning glance at the Rector. ‘It is she who is at the bottom of this, then?’

‘No, sir; it is not that. Only she knows about her talents, and has given her a situation in the choir of St. Ethelburga’s.’

‘What do you think of *that*?’ inquired Mr. Talbot of the Rector.

Mr. Freeman shook his head and groaned; ‘It is all bad,’ was what his face said, ‘but this is the worst part of it.’

Poor Richard, though such a castaway, had a heart not without gratitude.

‘Indeed, sir, it is not Aunt Edith’s fault—if fault there be,’ he said. ‘It is all my own doing. She has given me no encouragement in the matter; she has even kept Lucy in London, and given her employment, solely, as I believe, to keep her out of my way.’

Mr. Talbot smiled a bitter smile. ‘First

my father and then my son,' he said, as though talking to himself.

Mr. Freeman nodded in adhesion. 'That is characteristic of the Jesuit system,' said he. 'They will pursue their ends even to the third and fourth generation.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Dick, who dimly recognised in the last remark a quotation from the Scriptures, and felt that things were growing more serious every moment. 'I have loved Lucy ever since she was a child, and she has loved me, and of late I have felt that I cannot live without her, and—and—she cannot live without me.'

'And upon what means do you propose to live together?' inquired Mr. Talbot, cynically. It was curious to see how the man of the world, which had been dead in him for so many years, had become suddenly resuscitated. 'I suppose, however, your Aunt Edith has promised to see to that.'

'No, sir, she has promised nothing.

Indeed, she knows nothing of—of our engagement.'

'Supposing, for argument's sake, that is true, I ask again, how do you propose to live?'

Dick had about thirty shillings in his pocket; a handsome watch (thanks to we know whom); a gold pencil-case (which, however, dropped its leads); and a clasp knife. Lucy would have two hundred pounds when she came of age, but that would not be for some years to come. These were their wretched assets.

'Well, sir, I ventured to hope that in course of time—I don't say at once' (this with the air of one who is prepared for compromise, ready to meet the other of the high contracting parties half-way), 'that we should secure your consent to our union.'

'Did you, or did you not, rather, speculate upon gaining my forgiveness after you had disgraced yourself?' Here the Rector whispered something in the speaker's ear. 'I say, sir, did you not, in your ignorance and presumption, think of making this girl

your wife clandestinely, being unaware that it is not permitted for a boy and girl, without the consent of their parents, to get married in this country ?’

‘Or in any other,’ put in the Rector hastily, who thought, perhaps, he saw a notion of crossing the Channel in Dick’s despairing eyes.

‘I was quite aware, sir, of the difficulties of my position,’ said Dick (to whom, however, to say the truth, this legal objection had not before occurred), ‘and had no intention such as you ascribe to me. I should not, I admit, have spoken to you of the matter for some time to come, but that I met Lucy at Swanborough to-day, and—and—by some who happened to witness that meeting my conduct was misconstrued; then Mr. Pole said he would not be responsible for me, and sent me home.’

‘Did you meet this young person at Swanborough by appointment?’ inquired Mr. Talbot.

‘A very pertinent question,’ murmured the Rector, nodding his head. ‘His

Dorothy herself,' he thought, 'could scarcely have put it better.'

'Yes, I did,' said Richard doggedly, gathering himself together for a final effort. The Rector's manner irritated him more than that of his father alarmed him; he felt he was being treated as a child, and anger gave the spur to his courage. 'I mean to marry her, sir; I have passed my word to do so; neither to-day nor to-morrow perhaps, but some day. If you set your face against us, so much the worse for us; but that will make no difference as to the final result.'

'That is your ultimatum, is it?' inquired Mr. Talbot scornfully.

'It is what I wish to say, sir—though I hope without offence to you.'

'And it is all you have to say? I don't mean to say that it is not quite enough, but you may possibly have something else to add—to fix the amount of your own allowance, for example.'

'I have nothing else to add, sir,' said Dick, scarlet with rage and shame.

‘ Then you had better go to bed. I will speak to you in the morning, when you are —sober.’

Richard knew that his father did not mean that he was drunk, but only that when morning came he might take a less unreasonable view of matters. He felt that he had gained nothing while he had covered himself with ridicule. The retreat which he had meditated if the worst came to the worst (as it *had* come), namely, that idea of marrying Lucy straight off, and trusting to the chapter of accidents, was no longer open to him ; he could not marry, it seemed, till he came of age, without his father’s consent. Such was the oppressive and tyrannical condition of the British law. It was almost a comfort to him that his father appeared really angry ; that at least gave a seriousness to his own intentions. Whereas he had a horrible suspicion that the Rector had been once or twice upon the verge of an explosion of mirth. He felt certain that in the smoking-room at Masham he was at that moment affording

immense amusement. He called to mind how old Mr. Pole had roared at his honest frankness, and how his grandson had joined in that indecent exhibition of mirth. Even Greene had not stuck by him as the claims of friendship demanded, notwithstanding also his own considerate behaviour to that gentleman in the affair of Miss Meredith, which really *had* been something to laugh at. He had not looked for much sympathy, but it was hard lines, indeed, that his honourable intentions towards a virtuous young woman should have made him a public laughing-stock. If his father had disinherited him upon the spot, and turned him out of house and home, it would have almost seemed preferable to his present position.

He threw open the window of his room, and gazed out into the summer night. Nature at least saw nothing ridiculous in the condition of his affairs, but was looking serenely calm and still. Afar off, above the last trees of the avenue, towered the old ruin, hallowed by his first kiss of love.

Beneath it lay the spinney, which embraced his Lucy's dwelling-place, to which he foresaw that she would never more be permitted to come. That would make no difference to him, except that her absence would be wretchedness indeed. He had promised her marriage, and he would never break his word to her.

Such were the noble terms in which his thoughts expressed themselves; but perhaps the truth was that he had set his heart upon making the girl his wife, and he did not intend, come what might, to be thwarted in the matter. Like Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Mr. Richard Talbot could not 'bide to be disappointed' even in small things; much more, then, in that which was the greatest desire of his life, namely, to marry Lucy Lindon.



CHAPTER III.

A MIND DISEASED.

RICHARD TALBOT was mistaken in supposing that either his father or the Rector regarded the communication that he had so unexpectedly made to them as a laughing matter. When the library door had closed behind him the two men regarded one another for awhile in silence, and with grave faces. The Rector was the first to speak.

‘ This is an awkward business, my friend, but you must not lay it too much to heart. Richard is far too young to really know his own mind in such a matter.’

‘ But why should he *have* a mind for such a thing ?’ interrupted the other im-

patiently. 'If he had met this girl elsewhere without knowing who she was, such an infatuation could have been pardoned; but a gamekeeper's daughter! A girl out of my own village, where my position should have been a safeguard to her.'

'Let us be thankful that it *was* a safeguard—at least in one sense,' returned the Rector gravely. 'The young man has behaved honourably, however mistaken he may have been. It is not every youth in his station who would have taken such a course. A virtuous attachment——'

'You are not a Talbot, Mr. Freeman,' interrupted the other quickly. 'You do not understand, that when a family has kept itself for centuries free from any disgrace of this kind, how the mere thought of such a stain upon their scutcheon galls one.'

'I understand that, my friend,' answered the other gently, 'but you must forgive me for pointing out that such considerations have small weight indeed in the sight of Him with whom a thousand years are but

as yesterday, compared with moral rectitude. This lad of yours might have done worse even than that which he threatens to do, though the world would have thought lightly of it, and you, my friend, let us hope, are not of the world.'

'The old man within me is stronger than I thought,' replied the other, as though talking to himself. 'What, indeed, are name and race compared with well-doing, or a few generations of an erring house with the eternity that awaits us all. How could it ever have come about, Freeman? There must have been neglect somewhere—want of supervision, blindness?'

'Your son had no companions, Talbot; he has been left of necessity to his own resources, and such society as he has found for himself has not been always of an improving or edifying kind.'

'You mean Parkes, I suppose,' said Mr. Talbot, frowning. 'I don't suppose my gamekeeper taught my son to fall in love. I see another hand in that matter—more subtle and more dangerous.'

‘I think it very likely, my friend ; but to use your own argument, not even a Jesuit could persuade a young man to give his affections where he had no mind to place them, though he—or she—might have fostered such an attachment when it was once formed.’

‘She *has* fostered it, of course ; that is certain. He would never have been so resolute had he not been conscious of having backers.’

‘Your son said that he had none, however ; and I think him truthful.’

‘Edith has deceived him, of course ; she has promised nothing with her tongue, but everything by her manner. I was stern enough with him just now, but I feel that it would be dangerous to push matters too far.’

‘I think it would be very dangerous. We must trust to time.’

‘Yes, Freeman, but I cannot wait. There is no time for me. The man who speaks to you is on the threshold of eternity.’

‘ My good friend, that is what we all are——’

‘ No, no, I don’t mean that,’ interrupted the other impatiently ; ‘ I should never have spoken of the matter but for this ; I am a dying man, Freeman.’

‘ A dying man !’ repeated the other incredulously.

‘ Yes, I have had warnings—not spiritual ones, which our fallen nature may misconstrue ; but physical signs, which there can be no mistaking.’

‘ A man is a bad judge of his own health, my friend.’

‘ When he wishes to live—or not to live ; but not when, as in my case, he says “ Heaven’s will be done.” You are thinking that I look well and strong enough. So dies the oak by the lodge gate, with its heart nigh eaten away. I have lain in this room unconscious for hours, twice within the last three months ; cold as a stone. This new trouble has, I feel, already done me mischief.’

‘ You astound and distress me beyond all measure, Talbot.’

‘That is folly. How often have you told your flock that to live is loss, to die is gain!’

‘It is a blessed thing to have a mind at ease, no doubt, when the gates of Death seem open.’

‘Yes, but mine is not at ease.’

‘My friend!’

Even Lady Earnshaw would have forbore to call the Rector ‘hypocrite’ as he uttered those words. His face exhibited the extremes of astonishment and distress. That this ‘chosen vessel’ and his own familiar friend, Francis Talbot, should thus confess to a doubt of his own spiritual security was a blow indeed.

‘I cannot talk of this matter now, Freeman,’ answered the other in a changed tone. ‘Suffice it for the present to say that my time is short; that it behoves me to keep my soul unvexed by temporal troubles. This matter of my son’s must be settled, if it be possible, as soon as may be. Death has terrors of its own enough; let me not have to feel in my last hour,

that so soon as I am gone, Richard will make this girl his wife ; that she will be mistress here in the home of my fathers ; that my name, my race——’

Here there was silence. Mr. Talbot had fallen back in his chair, like a thing of lead, and the colour of his face was as lead likewise. Yet even as nerve failed him, he made a signal with his hand, which his companion rightly interpreted to mean that his condition was to be kept secret. The Rector eased his cravat, threw water in his face, and let the cool night air play freely on it through the open window. He felt the responsibility of not calling assistance, but his friend’s will was as law unto him, in all personal matters. Presently these simple remedies had their effect. The livid pallor of the patient’s face changed slowly to a more healthy hue, and he presently uttered a deep sigh.

‘It is the third time,’ he murmured ; ‘the third time.’

‘You are doing a grievous wrong to yourself and others, Talbot,’ said the

Rector, gently, 'if you do not take advice for this.

'I am more than forty, my friend, and you know the proverb,' answered the other, with a feeble smile. 'Doctors can do nothing for me ; it is borne in upon me that the fourth time will be fatal.'

It would have been easy for most persons to have combated this gloomy view, but for the Rector it was difficult ; when things were 'borne in' upon men like Mr. Talbot and himself, he had always allowed that they had a force far beyond that of mere presentiment. Nevertheless he did essay to look on the bright side of matters.

'You are a young man still, Talbot, with many years, I trust, of usefulness before you. At all events, it is God who measures our days.'

'He has measured mine,' answered the other, quietly. Pray say nothing of this to any one. I shall not be sorry that it has occurred in your presence, if it convinces you of the necessity of settling this unhappy affair of Richard's as soon as may

be——’ He paused, and for the moment his companion feared, from the sharp pinch and pain of his thin lips, that there was about to be a relapse. ‘Thank you, I am quite myself again now, Freeman. Listen. One of us two must go up to town at once and see this girl.’

The Rector bowed in acquiescence.

‘I suppose, so far as authority goes,’ continued Mr. Talbot, ‘I am the better envoy; but I am not used to deal with—with any of my fellow-creatures; and there is besides the chance of meeting with Edith. The girl may be dwelling under her protection for what I know.’

‘She is living in Ford’s Alley, at a Children’s Home, which is maintained by your sister. That has been admitted by Mrs. Parkes.’

‘Ah! then it is as I suspected. Well, you will go there, Freeman. You will know what to say, and what to do. Perhaps money will be wanted.’

‘Probably. Indeed, I should think certainly.’

‘ Then do not spare it.’

‘ The girl’s mother and her step-father are at hand, remember, Talbot. Of course they are abetting her, but it might be made worth their while to take the contrary course.’

‘ That can be considered afterwards, if necessary ; no stone must be left unturned to put a stop to this mad scheme ; but if the girl herself can be brought to see the wickedness and folly of her designs, that will weigh most with Richard. He must not be left to his own resources, either, here at Durnton. There is some friend of his at Masham.’

‘ Leonard Greene.’

‘ Ay ; I will ask him to the Tower.’

‘ That will be a good plan. And now that matters are in train for remedying this mischief, do not let it disturb you.’

The Rector rose and held out his hand.
‘ Come, let me see you to your room.’

‘ I shall do well enough, Freeman.’

‘ Indeed, I hope so. These attacks proceed sometimes from disturbance of the

mind quite as much as from ailment of the body.'

'You are right there.'

He paused, as the Rector thought, in doubt whether to pursue that subject; but presently added, 'Well, you will be off in the morning. A thousand thanks. Good-night, and Heaven bless you.'

Left alone, he took to walking up and down the room, as was his wont, and uttering his thoughts aloud. 'The mind,' he said; 'aye, so it is. Who can minister to a mind diseased? Yet, why diseased? for I was surely right. Heaven knows I sought not my own profit. Nor was it even for my son's sake—my son, my only son—to wed a poacher's daughter! If I die he'll do it. Can this be retribution? No, no, *no*. Yet why have I never put it to Freeman? Because when one is right one wants no adviser. What did Richard say the other day about right? That one always knows what it is: only to do it one must do it at once. He is a mere child and prattles like a child. And yet he

thinks of marriage, and such a marriage !
This is a sore trial : to be struck through
him ; always through *him*, poor lad. Yes,
if one was not sure—quite sure—one would
say it was Retribution !



CHAPTER IV.

TOBACCO AND A WIFE.

THE Rector had gone home from the Tower with a mind almost staggering under its unwonted burden : the escapade of Richard, the illness of the Squire, the journey that he himself had promised to undertake in the cause of his friend, were subjects each of which would have been sufficient to give him food for reflection. As it was, his intellectual powers suffered from plethora ; they had had more given to them than they could digest. The Rector's consciousness of this fact added yet another source of mental disquietude. If these things disagreed with him, how would they affect the constitution of his

good lady? That was the way he put it even to himself, being both a gentleman and a Christian; but what he meant was, how would it affect her *temper*—a piece of moral mechanism which required very delicate handling. This excellent man had, of course, no secrets from his good lady; that was well understood between them. But on the other hand, his friend had enjoined silence upon him respecting the serious condition of his health; and his heart was loyal towards his friend. There might have been some embarrassment in the situation to an individual less bent upon doing good, and especially on doing no harm to his fellow-creatures.

To tell his wife all that he had learnt himself—she being of such a sensitive, not to say excitable, disposition—would be clearly hurtful to her. There was but little news stirring, as a rule, at Durnton. In winter-time there was an occasional wreck on that part of the coast, but in summer the days went on without an event; a young woman would be promoted

from the village school to service ; a young man would show 'signs of grace' by attending the week-day lecture, or signs of the other thing by going to sleep in the church gallery on the Sabbath ; the postman would get drunk at fair-time, and leave the letters promiscuously — which stirred up a good bit of scandal (for without being absolutely inquisitive, one must stop somewhere, and such an opportunity of reading other people's correspondence was not to be neglected) ; there would be sometimes a breeze in the Book Club, some members of which had a carnal taste for novels, and whose endeavours to introduce that pestilent description of literature had to be combated *à l'outrance*. But, except for these excitements, the wheel of life went very smoothly at Durnton. To hear that an earthquake was rocking the church, or that Swanborough Hill had broken out as a volcano, would have been hardly less shocking news to an inhabitant of this quiet village than what the Rector had got in his budget—that the son and

heir of the Talbots had engaged himself to the daughter of his father's gamekeeper. And if this was so in the case of an ordinary recipient, what would it be to Mrs. Freeman?—who had so long had her own views about 'that man Parkes,' and his wife, and the 'young person,' his daughter, who, 'without good looks, had that sort of attractiveness about her which is unhappily found to be "taking" with the male sex.' The Rector felt sure that he had quite as much news to tell his wife as would be good for her to hear, without saying anything about Mr. Talbot's state of health.

Mrs. Freeman was a lady of moderate height, but of imposing proportions. Mr. Pole had so far forgotten his fine old country manners on one occasion as to describe her as 'that stout and stumpy parson's wife down at Durnton.' She had not an angle about her except at the tip of her tongue, which could be, and indeed was at times, exceedingly sharp. Upon this occasion, however, she received her husband graciously enough. For he was

earlier at home than usual ; his friend was always loath to let him leave the Tower now, for solitude had become unwelcome to him.

‘ Well, Giles, for once I shall have some one with whom to exchange a word or two ; it would be well for Mr. Talbot if he always retired to rest at such a reasonable hour—you don’t smell of smoke either, as usual.’

‘ He has not gone to rest, poor fellow,’ returned the Rector, without noticing this last remark : he had been too full of thought to smoke as usual upon his way home, but he began to feel the want of tobacco ; he felt that he could explain matters to his wife so much more easily if he had a pipe in his mouth. The virtues of smoking are infinite ; among other things, it conceals the features when exposed to too strict a scrutiny ; imports the appearance at least of deep reflection, and gives one time to mature one’s replies before delivering them.

‘ What do you mean, Giles ? Has any-

thing happened to trouble Mr. Talbot? What is it? I am sure something has happened.'

'Well, yes, there has ; something so serious, that I don't even like to talk about it. Richard has come home suddenly.'

'Richard! What, from Masham?'

'Yes.' The Rector pulled out his tobacco-pouch, and began to turn it about in his fingers abstractedly.

'Now, don't *fiddle!*' exclaimed his lady emphatically. 'Just tell me what has happened.'

'Well, it is a long story,' sighed the Rector, 'and I am a little put out and flurried.' He slowly emptied the contents of his pocket upon the table—amongst them his pipe-case. 'I think I could go into the whole matter better—but there, I suppose it would hurt the curtains.'

'You may smoke one pipe, if you like: only do go on, Giles.'

'So I will, my dear, if you will give me time. He filled his pipe and lit it, while his wife fidgeted upon her chair, and in

her excitement absolutely forgot to cough as usual, and protest she was half choked with his nasty tobacco.

‘Well, Richard has come home from Masham; indeed, was *brought* home by Henry Pole.’

‘Intoxicated!’ exclaimed Mrs. Freeman triumphantly. ‘I thought as much: with such low companions as he is permitted to mix with in the village——’

‘No, my dear, *not* intoxicated,’ put in the Rector; ‘or, at least, not in a material sense; in another, indeed, he may be almost said to be so. He has engaged himself to be married.’

‘Didn’t I say so!’ ejaculated Mrs. Freeman, more triumphantly even than before. ‘It is to Margaret Pole, of course. Well, it’s early days: but I felt it must happen sooner or later. The Squire is delighted, of course?’

Mrs. Freeman’s eloquence was so voluble that the stream of it could not easily be arrested, unless by her own volition. When she put a question it was as

though she had dropped a flood-gate. Then, and not till then, her would-be interlocutor had a chance.

‘No, my dear; it’s not Miss Pole on whom Richard has fixed his affections. I wish it were.’

‘You *don’t* mean to tell me it’s Miss Meredith? Well, I never breathed the idea to anybody, but I have had a sort of presentiment all along that that would happen. Those masculine, horsey girls are very often as deep as those who look as if butter would not melt in their mouths. I hope Mr. Talbot will never consent to his son’s marriage with a girl who goes a hunting. That she should give up that sort of thing should be a *sine quâ non*. You urged that, Giles, I do hope?’

‘I should have urged it, my dear Dorothea,’ observed the Rector, quietly pulling at his pipe; ‘but the opportunity never offered itself. Miss Meredith, with all her faults, would have been infinitely preferable to the unhappy, and, indeed, disgraceful——’

‘Good Heavens!’

‘ Yes, my dear, it is worse than anything you can imagine ; though I should not say that, for indeed your own sagacity has before now foreshadowed the possibility of such an entanglement.’

Mrs. Freeman nodded, and a fleeting smile passed across her eager face ; of course she had foreseen it all along, whatever it was ; only she had not the least suspicion, as yet, as to *what* it was.

‘ My dear Dorothea, it’s Lucy Lindon.’

‘ *What ?* Impossible !’ Such was the force of this unexpected shock that speech for the moment failed her. ‘ Well,’ she continued, after a long pause, ‘ this comes of neglecting good advice. It was obvious to everybody, everybody, except the person whose business it was to see it, that that boy’s visits at the spinney could have but one end. Thank Heaven, I did *my* duty, so far as I was permitted, in pointing out the danger to Mr. Talbot. This is what comes of putting a premium on dishonesty, and on not coming to church on Sundays. What does he think of his favourite, Mr.

George Parkes, *now?* Not that it was the man who had the chief hand in this : it was that woman—Annie Lindon that was ; she has been laying the train for years, and has now applied the match, and the thing has gone off with a vengeance.'

The Rector had not been a very attentive listener to this harangue, for he could guess what it would consist of, and from long experience was a pretty good judge of when he could give his mind to other things while his wife was holding forth. On this occasion he had to mature some plan for breaking to the lady his next communication—namely, the necessity of his going up to London. The words 'match' and 'gone off' had, however, attracted his attention.

'Things are not quite so bad as you imagine,' said he ; 'though they are very bad.'

'I should like to know how they could be worse?'

'Well, the lad is safe at the Tower, and the girl is in town. They met the other

day at Swanborough, however, by appointment.'

'The hussey! The deep, designing, abominable hussey!'

'Nay, my dear, it was Richard's fault; it was he, as I understand, who made the appointment.'

'Richard?' echoed the lady, with withering scorn; 'is it possible, Mr. Freeman, that you believe *that*?'

'The boy said so himself, my dear, at all events.'

'Said so? What of that? She told him to say so, of course, If she had said so *herself*, you would not, I suppose, have believed her, and why should you believe her at secondhand? Well, we shall get rid of her at Durnton now, and of her mother, and of that scoundrel, her step father, though I don't think him half so bad as the women of his family. The Squire's eyes are opened at last, I suppose, and these wretches will have to go.'

'Nay, it would be injudicious to push matters to such extremities; the lad is very

headstrong, and it is just possible he might go with them.'

'What? make a gipsy marriage and live with her in a cart in the woods? What folly!'

'Of course it would be folly, my dear Dorothea; but then young men are given to folly. No. Our wiser course, as the Squire thinks, and I certainly agree with him, is if possible to detach this young woman's affections——'

'Affections!' put in Mrs. Freeman sharply; 'let us talk common sense, I beg. In plain English, you mean to try to buy her off.'

'Well, really——if you put it that way—but I should rather say we shall endeavour to convince her that her interests and her obvious duty lie in the same direction.'

'Ah! you flatter yourself you'll make it worth her while to give him up. You'll find that a hard nut to crack, I promise you.'

'You think, then, that she really loves him?' said the Rector, with undisguised surprise.

‘On the contrary, I am confident she doesn’t care twopence about him,’ answered the lady curtly; ‘but she knows on which side her bread is buttered, and to that side she will stick.’

‘But what course would you recommend to us, my dear?’

‘Stringent measures. The spinney cottage is the Squire’s, and he should give Parkes and his wife notice to quit: the man of course has only his wages to live upon, and nobody but Mr. Talbot is weak enough to employ him. Then offer them a hundred pounds to leave the country, taking the girl with them. She is cunning enough, no doubt, and would make her objections, but it is her mother who pulls the strings.’

The Rector took out his note-book. ‘You are generally right, my dear, and at all events your suggestions are always noteworthy. If our plan fails, we will certainly try yours.’

‘Our plan?’ echoed the lady, with a slight acidity of tone, and manifesting some

symptoms of congelation—the first frosty fret of the rivulet—‘I have not yet heard your plan.’

‘Well, as I have said, the Squire has made up his mind, in the first instance, to see what can be done with the girl herself. She is in town at present.’

‘Oh, he’s going up to town, is he?’

‘Well, no, dear; he is not. He is so upset by this misfortune that he feels quite unequal to such a surprise; he has asked me to undertake the matter for him.’

‘Oh, indeed; and what did you say?’

Mrs. Freeman would have folded her arms if her contour would have permitted it; as it was, she clasped her hands above her waist, and paused for a reply. Her husband knew that this air and attitude boded mischief—it was the hoisting of the domestic Fitz-Roy drum, that prophesied not only squalls but a tornado.

‘Well, my love, I resolved to take your opinion upon the matter before giving a positive answer. The girl, it is true, however unworthy may be her conduct, is a

member of my flock, and so far I should have authority to appeal to her. As the clergyman of her parish——'

'Stuff and nonsense!' put in his companion decisively: 'clergymen are like all other men, when they have to deal with these designing creatures, who happen to be also of an attractive appearance. This is essentially a matter that lies within a woman's province. I will go up to town, Giles, and deal with this young person myself.'

If it had not been for his faithful pipe, the Rev. Giles Freeman would have here found himself at his wits' end. He was well convinced that if his worthy lady and Lucy Lindon met there would be a battle royal; and though he had every confidence in his Dorothea getting the best of it, a victory would in this case have been as fatal to the cause he had in view as a defeat. It was not by anathemas and crushing sarcasms that this young lady was to be conquered, but by politic treatment and material arguments.

‘ Your idea would be admirable, my dear Dorothea, had we to deal with this girl alone ; but, unfortunately, there is a serious complication. She is at this moment under the personal protection of Miss Talbot.’

Mrs. Freeman’s countenance fell : if she stood in fear of any woman upon earth it was of that quiet creature in the grey robe of a Sister of Charity. The robe was hateful to her as though it had been the scarlet garment of the Lady of Babylon herself, but she did not fear *that* any more than the bull fears a red rag ; it was not Sister Edith’s spiritual faith that produced any feeling of alarm, or sense of inferiority, in the Rector’s wife ; for she thought her a poor benighted creature for entertaining it. It was the lady’s temporal position that subdued her. Mrs. Freeman would have defied the Vatican, and had not perhaps an excess of reverence for the bench of Bishops ; but for ‘ a county family ’ she had a respect that bordered upon awe ; and the Talbots had held the Tower from a time when even the Poles of Masham had never been heard

of. When face to face with 'a lady of the land'—one who had had ancestors that had been indigenous to the same spot for centuries—Mrs. Freeman never felt upon equal terms: her feelings resembled those of a low-caste Hindoo in the presence of some sacred personage of her own race; her natural instinct was to abase herself before her; and she did it. With the lords of acres—the men—she did not feel this tendency to prostration; and, indeed, as we have seen in the case of Mr. Talbot, she could set herself up in opposition to them. But the women were 'taboo;' in their presence she could not lift a finger, except as it were deferentially to hold up the skirts of their raiment; and, of all women, Miss Talbot was the most 'taboo' to Mrs. Freeman. Only twice in her life had she been in her company; and on both those occasions under what might be termed favourable circumstances; that is, they had met at the Tower, where she herself was considered at least a friend of the family, while Edith was held as a secret foe. And

yet the latter had in her quiet way carried everything before her, and on the Rector's wife attempting some slight resistance, had, as the slang of the day would term it, 'jumped upon her;' or rather she had seemed to walk in her stately way right through her, and come out at the other side—the winning side. She had neither done nor said anything of an insulting character; but her superiority of position had been as clearly established as though she had rung the bell and the other had answered it. Mrs. Freeman had not had the pluck to answer *her*, but by her silence had admitted herself vanquished. On the second occasion of their meeting she had not ventured to contend with Edith Talbot at all.

It was certainly, therefore, far from Mrs. Freeman's desire to go up to Gresham Street, where, as she believed, Lucy Lindon was residing, and do battle not only with the Squire's sister, but with another high-caste woman, Lady Earnshaw; but, on the other hand, she had a natural inclination to

assert her prerogative, and also, perhaps, a secret reluctance to expose her excellent spouse to the machinations of such a designing minx as the gamekeeper's daughter had proved herself to be.

'Why should we not *both* go up to town, Giles?' inquired she. 'We could then be of mutual assistance to one another in this matter. You could bring Lucy away from Miss Talbot's roof—which you could not, of course, do were I not at the hotel to receive her—and then I could give her a good talking to.'

'That would be an excellent plan,' said the Rector gravely, 'and, I need not say, would be the one I should select had I the choice; but the staying at an hotel is an expensive matter, and, though of course Mr. Talbot would defray the charge of one of us, we could hardly expect him to pay for two.'

Far be it from us to suppose that the Rev. Giles Freeman could stoop to actual deception; but he certainly did exhibit on this occasion that cunning of the serpent

which it is enjoined upon us to link with the harmlessness of the dove. He knew, in his heart, not only that Lucy was not in Gresham Street, but that the Squire would not have hesitated to pay the expenses of ten people, instead of two, if the object he had in view could be thereby furthered. But he felt that it would not be furthered by his Dorothea's presence in London, and that he was, therefore, justified in using all lawful means to prevent her accompanying him thither. That simple consideration of expense settled the matter ; for the Rector's wife, with all her faults, had a due regard for domestic economy, and entertained no such passion for spending her husband's money, no matter at what inconvenience to him, that some ladies of far higher pretensions are wont to exhibit. But it is a question if the Rev. Giles Freeman would have ever thought of this argument had it not been for his pipe. Under cover of its friendly cloud he had concealed his fears and matured his wits : it had suggested to him, first, Miss Talbot's presence, and

secondly the hotel bill; and now it whispered to him that, having gained his point, he had better hold his tongue. If he had lived in classic times, his piety would certainly have compelled him to acknowledge his obligations to the God of Tobacco. As it was, he heaved a gentle sigh of relief; and while his spouse looked out what was necessary for him to take in his portmantau (for he was to start the next morning by the early train), emitted great clouds of incense and blessed his stars.



CHAPTER V.

THE RECTOR'S ARGUMENTS.

THE Rector started for town from Durnton without another interview with the Squire. He knew what he had to do, and was empowered to do it, and nothing more could come out of mere talk about the matter. Moreover, time pressed. It was essential that Richard should have no opportunity of communicating with the object of his affections by letter or any other means. Mr. Freeman quite understood the importance of his mission, but thought himself fully competent to accomplish it. He remembered to have seen Lucy of late about the village, looking very graceful and handsome ; but, on account of her step-father's

bad character, he had had but little to say to her. She did not come to church very regularly, and though her mother went thither, that did not win her way to the good graces of Mrs. Freeman; and even clergymen, as that lady has observed (though to illustrate another subject), are but men, and are considerably influenced by their wives. He had, in fact, studiously kept himself aloof from the spinney cottage and its tenants. On the other hand, he remembered Lucy Lindon well, as she had been, a year or two ago, the brightest and comeliest girl in his village school; a little prone to insubordination and idleness, but by no means a difficult child to manage if you went the right way with her, which was the way of kindness. As she was then—in disposition at all events—so he pictured her to himself now; and he did not think it would be a very difficult matter for him to persuade her what would be for her own good, or at all events what would be a very serious evil both to herself and him she professed to love, and probably did love.

Mr. Freeman by no means shared his wife's opinions respecting Lucy. Without supposing her to be disinterested in her attachment to the Squire's son, he thought there might be a good deal of genuine regard in it. He knew that neither men nor women are often schemers in their youth, and, being a male himself, he understood that the ill-behaviour of these young people was not all on one side, or at all events on the girl's side. A paternal air, a firm but kind manner, and some indisputable logic, would, he felt sure, set matters straight. He was pleased to think he could be of service to his friend the Squire ; but otherwise—and whatever his good lady might think—he looked forward with no agreeable anticipation to this visit to town.

He had not been in London for many years, and though he had at one time made his mark there—if a reputation with a single congregation can be called anything more than a scratch—he was well aware that all record of it had long vanished. A preacher, be he ever so earnest, has no more enduring

fame than an actor, of whom the second generation after that which applauded him to the skies has absolutely no knowledge. And even at the date of Mr. Freeman's departure from the metropolitan stage his authority was on the wane, and he had begun to find himself deserted by his followers albeit for conscience' sake. In a graphic life-story of our own time, we have been told of a once famous writer who bore with philosophic calm the world's neglect. How she who had been lauded by the public voice as only second to Shakespeare's self, survived to find herself among a race who had never read a line of her productions, and yet possessed her soul in peace and patience. But it is not every one who has the gentle spirit of Joanna Baillie. The decadence of her fame, too, must have been gradual, which was not the case with the Rector of Durnton. He was still a power in the country, a beacon and a shining light amidst the spiritual darkness of the Eastern Counties; and to come to town was to place himself under an extinguisher. He was

put out at once. This may seem a small thing to so genuine a man, but he had been a popular preacher—of all earthly callings the one which most tickles our self-esteem—and he felt it.

He drove from the railway-station to an old-fashioned hotel in the Strand, with which he had some acquaintance ; a gloomy establishment, the windows of which began half way up the wall, so that you could not look out of them from your chair. Upon which ground perhaps it was that it was so strongly recommended (in the advertisement) to country visitors as being so 'home-like.' As long as they sat still they might easily imagine themselves at their native Bullock Smithy, or, still better (on account of the muffled roar without), at Pargate-super-Mud. The people who frequented it were mostly of the country class ; they snatched a fearful joy from the pantomimes at Christmas-time, and apologised to the hall-porter when they came in after eleven o'clock at night ; they were very respectable people, and had plenty of money,

but they were always in fear for the amount of their bill. It was a relief to them when they got it, and found they could pay it without selling out their property in the Funds. The proprietor, who thoroughly understood his clients, was agreeably affable ; but the waiters were crusty, and the rooms were fusty to that extent, that even the food, which was good enough in its way, though very plain, seemed musty. The coffee-room, in which Mr. Freeman took his chop at mid-day, was not a cheerful spot, and the *Times*, as usual, was 'in hand.' There was nothing to attract the eye but the play-bills of the various theatres, which hung on the wall ; to some, no doubt, they promised enjoyment, but to the good Rector they only suggested the depravities of the town.

After his frugal meal, he started in a cab for the Children's Home in Ford's Alley. It agreeably surprised him that there was nothing in the exterior of that humble establishment that savoured of the errors of Rome ; for, though he knew that it was

the dwelling-house of Robert Parkes' sister, he thought that she might have been installed in some monastic office, with Sister Edith for her lady prioress, to the end that each captured child might the more surely be made a proselyte. It was one of these castaways—thus foredoomed to misery in both worlds—who opened the door to him, she having one little arm to do it with quite hale and strong (albeit the other was withered), and replied, in answer to his inquiries, that Mistress Parkes was above stairs.

With one foot on the bottom step he paused, arrested by a burst of harmony. The Rector was musical; it was a material sacrifice to him to have to set his face, from conscientious motives, against choral services and other Papistical pranks of the like kind in church. They were snares of the devil he knew, but he confessed to their immense attractions. Even here, upon this dangerous ground, overshadowed by the spiritual presence of the Scarlet Woman, it seemed to him that there was an angel

in the house discoursing celestial music. Low and sweet and clear, the harmony seemed to ravish his very soul. He had heard nothing like it, for beauty, though it was of so infinitely different a kind, since he had attended the Ely festival, and listened to the 'Messiah' in the cathedral, which on a week day had seemed permissible to him. When it ceased, he stood spell-bound, and ere he began to ascend the stairs there broke forth a different but still more entrancing sound, which once more rooted him to the spot. What he had first heard were the dying strains of a flute, fresh, silver-clear, yet gentle as the ripple of a brook ; and now there broke forth a stream of vocal melody, impetuous as though a Nile had burst its banks, and overflowed—but without one turbid wave—some thirsting vale. It seemed to fill the house, and all the air around, as the blithe bird, who carols out of sight upon the wings of morning, fills the sky with song. The words escaped his ears, but whether sacred or profane, the voice that

trilled them seemed divine to him. Not till it had ceased, and the last cadence had died away, like the whisper of a 'god in pain,' did the Rector dare to place his heavy foot upon the wooden stair. At the sound of it there was a quick movement of other feet on the floor above him, and a door opened, throwing light on the narrow and dusky way.

It seemed strange, after so harmonious a reception, to come upon the form that met him on the landing;—a stunted, withered creature, looking more like elf than angel, with a face all wrinkles, and with tufts of hair above her bright black eyes, that looked like snow with fire beneath them. On seeing the Rector they at once, however, lost their keen and somewhat angry glance; it was plain they expected some other and less welcome visitor.

'What is your business, sir?' inquired she, somewhat curtly; then, as he came into the room, and she noticed his clerical attire, she added in softened tones, 'I beg your pardon, sir, you are from St. Ethelburga's.'

‘Indeed I am not,’ returned the visitor, with some asperity. ‘I have no connection with that—ahem—institution—whatever.’

The little woman nodded sharply, like a bird, and motioned, with a listening and somewhat hostile air, for him to proceed.

‘You are Susan Parkes, I believe ; I am come to see your niece, Lucy Lindon, upon particular and private business.’

‘She is my niece, as you say, sir,’ replied the little woman dryly, ‘and, being so, I am fully competent to hear anything you have to say to her, on her behalf.’

‘This matter, however, is for her private ear. My name is Freeman, and I am the rector of Durnton Regis.’

‘A thousand pardons, sir ; pray take a seat.’ The little woman’s countenance, still grave, had become all respect and courtesy. She was about to leave the room when the Rector stopped her.

‘One moment,’ he said. ‘That is a handsome flute I see upon the table—indeed, a magnificent one ; yet not un-

worthy of the sounds it has just uttered. May I ask who played it ?

‘ Well, sir, it was me.’

‘ You ?’ Mr. Freeman was always courteous, even to the poorest (unless they ‘ flew in his face ’ in regard to spiritual matters), but he here exhibited a surprise that bordered on incredulity. The little woman, however, was far from being displeased at this, for she felt that his doubts were a compliment to her art.

‘ Yes, sir ; I play a little. It is a thing that has been a great delight and solace to me for many years.’

‘ You play marvellously well. And the singing—it was not you also who sang ?’

‘ Oh no, sir ; that was Lucy.’

The Rector opened his mouth so wide that he might have been about to sing himself.

‘ Dear me ! And Lucy Lindon sings like that ! We never thought of her so highly when she was in our village choir, though to be sure that was some time ago.’

‘ It is teaching as has done it, sir ; “ deve-

loped the organ," as Mr. Hopkins says—that's the choir-master at St. Ethelburga's. To my mind it is more like a bird's voice than a girl's; I seem to be in the country on the downland, where I was reared, whenever I hear it. And the country seems the only proper place for a bird and a girl.'

The Rector glanced suspiciously at the speaker. Was it possible that this was a hint of hers that her niece had better go home to Durnton?—which was the very thing he had come up to town to prevent. Or was it merely the general proposition that it seemed to be?

'It matters little as to where one lives,' said he, gravely, 'if one only leads a good life. The country has its temptations as well as the town.'

'No, sir, not for a girl like our Lucy,' returned the little woman confidently; 'others may have as pretty a face, and even as sweet a voice (though I can hardly believe it) and no harm need come of it, if they are of a contented mind; but Lucy

is proud and masterful, and her heart so set on making her way in the world——'

'Ah,' interrupted the Rector mechanically, 'that is where girls like her make their mistake. In seeking to rise they sometimes take the very road to fall.'

'Excuse me, sir, but Lucy is not of that sort,' observed the other dryly. 'She wishes to be independent of everybody, and to make her own living, that's all ; as if I grudged her what little I can do for her ; or as if Miss Talbot was not willing as well as able to assist her !'

'Just so,' put in the Rector, 'and she has other friends, also, of whom perhaps she does not guess. I am come here on their behalf, Susan Parkes, and they think quite as you do in this matter. You may be sure that I shall have no advice to give to Lucy but what a right-minded, sensible woman like yourself will approve of ; only what I have to say is of a private nature, and I must needs see her alone.'

The little woman nodded in quiet acquiescence, and then knocked at an inner

door. 'Lucy, here is Mr. Freeman, from Durnton, come to see you.'

Here some wooden implement, probably a hair-brush, fell on the floor in the next room, and it was by no means immediately that the girl's voice was heard in reply : 'I will come directly, aunt.'

'She is evidently taken by surprise,' thought the Rector, 'and probably a good deal frightened. My task will therefore be all the easier.'

As Susan Parkes left the room, the inner door opened, and Lucy Lindon presented herself. He knew of course that it was she, or else he would hardly have recognised the girl he had seen a few weeks before in his own village. It was not only that she had taken that step from girlhood to womanhood which is always somewhat sharply defined in girls with a character of their own, but her beauty seemed to have received some marvellous accession ; her hazel eyes were larger and more lustrous ; her form more rounded and imposing ; her very hair in its soft nut-brown waves

looked like a crown upon a queen. There was nothing in her attire to suggest much change in her social position, yet he almost felt that he ought to address her, no more as Lucy, but as Miss Lindon. As it was, he held out his hand (which he had not intended to do), and said, 'How are you, Lucy?' in a tone which, though quite parental, was by no means so severe as his wife would have recommended.

'How are *you*, sir?' returned she quietly; a more keen observer would perhaps have detected an effort in the quietness, but to the Rector she seemed, as he afterwards expressed it, 'as cool as a cucumber.' 'I hope nothing is wrong with mother?'

'Your mother is well enough, Lucy,' he answered. 'It is not on her account that I am come up to see you, but on your own.'

'Pray take a chair,' said the young woman; he noticed that her voice had suddenly grown hard and metallic, and at the sound of it that expectation of an easy victory over her with which he had flattered himself seemed somehow to die away.

‘ I came here on behalf of Mr. Talbot, Lucy, who is much distressed and troubled by a certain matter which has come to his knowledge respecting his son Richard—and you.’

The colour rose high into her cheeks, and her shapely head trembled ever so little, like a flower upon its stem, but she answered not a word.

‘ Of course,’ he went on, ‘ it is but a boyish fancy ; the idea of Richard’s entertaining a serious passion at his age for any woman—even were she a fit object for it in other respects—is ridiculous, and would have to be put a stop to in any case ; but that he should set his affections upon a girl in your position—however natural it may be for you to inspire affection in any man’ (this little compliment was wrung from him in spite of himself, as much as suggested by his desire to keep her in good humour)—‘ is a circumstance to be deprecated indeed, and—and—not to be thought of seriously, in short, for a single instant.’

‘Then why have you come up to town about it, Mr. Freeman?’ inquired Lucy, coldly.

‘Well, because Mr. Talbot wishes the matter to be put an end to with as little fuss and trouble as may be. His desire is to spare you pain, and Richard pain. I am here to appeal against mere passion to your better feelings. You can scarcely have considered this matter in all its bearings, Lucy, or you would never, I think, have encouraged—well, permitted—this lad to pay his attentions to you. For consider, he is the son of your father’s master, of the man through whom you derive your bread——’

‘George Parkes is not my father,’ observed Lucy scornfully.

‘Nay, that is hair splitting; he is your step-father—the husband of your mother—and Mr. Talbot is his employer. I think that circumstance alone should have prevented any right-minded girl, with self-respect—which I see you have plenty of—from accepting the attentions of his son.’

‘I did not seek for them, sir,’ said Lucy, quietly, and with a touch of softness. ‘We were thrown very much together, as you know; and we have always loved one another.’

‘Well, well; that is natural enough. To childhood all differences of rank are unknown; but you are now a young woman, and cannot pretend to be ignorant of such distinctions. Now suppose for one moment—though I tell you at once that such an event is absolutely impossible, and for the next four years even legally so—suppose you should succeed in persuading this young man to disobey his father, to disregard the warnings of all his friends, and to marry you. Well, you would exile him at once from the society to which he has been accustomed, and drag him down to a lower level. This would happen even if his father should forgive him, and furnish him with the means (which he would certainly never do) of living like a gentleman. A man cannot live like a gentleman who has married beneath him.’

Here Lucy's hazel eyes lost all their softness, and in a colder voice even than before, she answered, 'That is your view, of course, Mr. Freeman, but it is not what everybody thinks. There are other things of some account in the world beside good blood and money. It is just possible in time that even the son of Mr. Talbot, of Talbot Tower, may not be ashamed to call me his wife.'

'I don't say he would be ashamed, in a moral sense, Lucy; but it is impossible that you can ever become his equal. Ah! —your singing,' exclaimed the Rector, as the conviction of what she put her trust in flashed upon him; 'if you think to rise in the social scale by any such accomplishment you are much mistaken. You may become celebrated, though even that is difficult, but that would make you in no respect more fit for Richard's wife, and, indeed, even less fit. I adjure you not to deceive yourself. I am taking it for granted that you have a real regard for the lad; that you are actuated by no mere

selfish or mercenary motives, such as are certain to be imputed to you by others (and for which I should have thought your high spirit would have itself prevented you from giving occasion) ; I am appealing to your kind and honest heart to save this boy from the consequences of his father's anger (which would be social ruin), because I believe it capable of self-sacrifice.'

He paused, and Lucy sat in silence. It was clear that she was deeply moved. The colour had left her cheeks ; the light of scorn and ire had fled from her eyes. Perhaps if he had left her to herself she would have done all he asked of her. But the *cacoëthes loquendi*—that fatal weakness of the pulpit—compelled the Rector to add something more.'

' You will do me the justice to say, Lucy, that I have abstained from all threat or menace. I have put the matter on the ground of good feeling solely. But of course there are material issues. The immediate effect of your declining to give Richard up would be that your mother and

her husband would have to leave Durnton. All possible channels of communication between this lad and you would have at once to be guarded against. You would, therefore, be the cause—and your own conscience will tell you whether the innocent cause—of the breaking up of your home and the ruin of your family; for if Mr. Talbot should turn off your step-father, who would employ him?’

The girl made a scornful gesture with her hand.

‘I think I could insure him the pittance he receives as a gamekeeper, Mr. Freeman, if that were all.’

The Rector’s last mine had failed, and it was plain had done damage to the cause of the engineer.

‘But it is *not* all, Lucy. It is a very small consideration compared with others.’

‘I know it,’ said she quietly; ‘but it is at all events disposed of. What does Dick say?’

‘Dick? You know you have no right to call him Dick,’ exclaimed the Rector, with irritation. ‘And what does it matter

what Dick says? He is a boy—a child. Whereas you, if not his senior in years, are a woman grown. I am afraid I must needs alter my opinion of you if you persist in using your influence to his hurt. The law itself, as I have said, protects him—I mean, forbids his marriage without parental consent for the next four years. Do you intend, throughout that time, to harass his poor father, and unsettle the boy himself at a period when it is essential that his mind should be given to study?’

‘I intend to take no advantage of anyone, Mr. Freeman,’ answered the girl steadily. ‘I wish to be fair and honest, but also true to Richard. I will not unsettle him, as you call it, by going to Durnton.’

‘But you will perhaps go to Swanborough, where you have met him already, and caused a public scandal,’ observed the Rector severely; ‘you will be surprised to hear, perhaps, that Mr. Pole has declined to keep him as his guest at Masham, because of your late interview.’

‘What had that to do with *him*?’ inquired the girl sharply.

‘Well, simply this : it only shows how ignorant you are of how the world regards such matters ; the ladies of the family, as I understand, resented your meeting with Richard at the picnic. Of course you meant no harm, but you see harm has been done. I knew it was not your fault, yet a grievous fault has been committed.’

Lucy rose from her seat, and drawing herself up to her full height, regarded her companion with a look of fixed and fiery scorn.

‘I care nothing for Mr. Pole or his ladies, nor for you, nor for Mr. Talbot,’ she said, ‘but I do care for Richard. If he wishes to give me back my troth—for it’s true that we are engaged to one another—let him do so. I will make no appeal against it. But I must hear it from his own lips, or read it in his own hand. Let Mr. Pole and his ladies be ashamed of me if they will. That is nothing, unless Richard is ashamed of me.’

‘One moment, Lucy ; you are permitting

passion to get the better of you. Listen to reason. It is absolutely certain that a marriage between Richard Talbot and yourself can never take place. It is the mere dream of two children. But since he regards you with affection, and you reciprocate it in honesty and honour, we acknowledge the bond. If you were dead, for example, you would be dear to us because Richard loved you; and you *are* dead, believe me, so far as any possibility of your becoming his wife is concerned.'

'I don't know what you mean, sir,' said Lucy coldly; 'I only know that I am at present alive.'

The Rector knew what he meant quite well, only felt a natural embarrassment in expressing it; still it had to be expressed, for it was the last arrow in his quiver.

'I mean,' he said, 'supposing you to act generously and unselfishly in this matter, that Mr. Talbot will consider himself under a heavy obligation to you, and whatever assistance you may require for the furtherance of any calling you may have in view,

or for any other purpose, will be given you, now and always without stint.'

'Then you have come here to bribe me, sir,' cried the girl, with concentrated passion. He held his hand up in remonstrance, but she motioned it away with scorn. 'Pshaw, that is what it comes to, say what you will. You are a clergyman, but Mr. Talbot has sent you to me as a lawyer. You may tell him that you have failed in your errand. I have no more to say either to him or you. Good-morning, sir.' And with that she withdrew into the room from which she had come out, and slammed and locked the door behind her.

If Lucy Lindon's exit from the Rector's presence had been a little stagey—especially as respects the locking of the door—it had been undoubtedly effective. She had put a summary end to the conference; for though Mr. Freeman would have stooped to a good deal in hopes of recovering his lost ground, he could not stoop to urge a new stream of argument through a keyhole. He felt himself checkmated, and in such

marvellously few moves that it resembled 'fool's mate.'

Whatever respect, however, he might have entertained for his late adversary's intelligence had been gained at the expense of his good opinion of her. It now seemed to him that the judgment his wife had passed upon the girl—'an artful, designing hussey'—had been a correct one, and moreover, that she was grievously wanting in reverence. All compromise with this young person was evidently at an end; and severe measures would have at once to be taken. There was little doubt that she was being backed up by her own people in a desperate attempt to marry the heir of Talbot Tower out of hand. Under these circumstances, it was with a look of cold disfavour that he met Susan Parkes in the room below on his way out.

'I hope, sir, Lucy has done nothing to anger you,' said the little woman simply.

'She has done everything to anger me, and to injure her character, madam, in the sight of every right-minded person,' was his indignant reply.

‘Those are hard words, Mr. Freeman, to apply to a fatherless girl. Lucy is head-strong and opinionated, but there is no real harm in her.’

‘There is a great deal of harm in her ; but I will take care that she shall only harm herself—and those who abet her. Your niece, Susan Parkes, you may take my word for it, will come to no good.’

‘Perhaps you will kindly tell me why, sir.’

‘I shall do nothing of the sort, for I believe you to be fully acquainted with her ill-doing.’

‘I know of no ill-doing of Lucy’s, sir ; and, as her aunt and guardian, I think I have a right to ask——’

‘I shall waste no more words in this house ; I——’

He had his hand upon the door when it was opened from without, and Sister Edith, in her garment of grey, presented herself to his astonished view. With a grave inclination of the head he was about to pass by her, without speaking, when the voice of Susan Parkes arrested him.

‘Miss Talbot, this is Mr. Freeman, from Durnton, who has just made a serious charge against my niece Lucy’s character, the nature of which he refuses to explain to me. Perhaps he will explain it to *you*.’

With Susan Parkes behind him, with Sister Edith before him, and the door closed at the back of her, the Rev. Giles Freeman most decidedly wished himself home at Durnton, and even entertained a somewhat pusillanimous regret that he had not brought his Dorothea to town with him.

‘I have no claim to any explanation, Susan, from Mr. Freeman,’ answered Sister Edith, after a slight pause; ‘but I do think that *you* have a right to ask for it. The girl is beneath your roof and under your protection.’

‘I have been given to understand, Miss Talbot, that she was under yours,’ observed the Rector dryly; the poor man felt his situation to be desperate, and, like a rat in the corner, he showed his teeth.

‘You have been misinformed, Mr.

Freeman,' answered Sister Edith quietly. 'Lucy Lindon has a talent for singing, which I thought it a pity she should not cultivate ; and therefore I have given her a little help in that way.'

'Then you are quite unaware that she has entangled the affections of your nephew Richard ?'

The colour rushed violently into Edith's pale face. 'I knew nothing of any entanglement, Mr. Freeman ; but I did have some suspicion that she had attracted Richard's attentions. Indeed, as Susan here will bear me witness, it was to prevent (as I hoped) the possibility of further mischief that I offered certain inducements to Lucy to stay in town.'

'Yes, sir ; this is how it was, Mr. Freeman,' put in the little woman, who had noticed the look of incredulity that had crossed the visitor's face ; 'it came to my knowledge that Master Richard had given Lucy a locket—which had also his portrait in it—and though we thought nothing serious of the matter, Miss Talbot and I

agreed that it was better that Lucy should not return to Durnton.'

'She did return, however, last Wednesday,' remarked the Rector.

'Only for the day, sir, to fetch her clothes; and we knew that Master Richard was away from home.'

'You did not know then that he met the girl that day by appointment, on Swanborough Hill.'

'Oh, Mr. Freeman,' cried Sister Edith, clasping her thin hands. 'Can this be true?'

Her tone was one of such manifest distress and pain, that the Rector could not doubt her ignorance of the event in question, and also her regret at it; but then she might regret it as having hastened matters before her jesuitical plans were ripe. There is nothing like a difference in theological opinion for the suggestion of a motive.

'It is certainly true, madam. It took place when Richard was at Mr. Pole's house, who in consequence has sent him

home. Your brother is beyond measure annoyed and troubled about the matter. I came here to-day to reason with the girl; but I find her so resolute to pursue her end, that I am obliged to suppose that she is conscious of having backers in this business.'

'Backers!' ejaculated Edith. 'Is it possible, Mr. Freeman, that you impute to *me* any share in such an outrageous scheme?'

'If I may say so without discourtesy, madam, I confess that such has been my suspicion. My own views in the matter are of no moment, however, but they are also Mr. Talbot's views.'

'What!' exclaimed Sister Edith, with indignation. 'Does Francis — my own brother — imagine that I, being cognisant of the attachment of his son to Lucy, encouraged it? Or do you, a clergyman, think it becoming your sacred office to entertain so vile a suspicion of your friend's sister? What object could I have in view? What gain? What satisfaction could I

derive from bringing about such an ill-assorted union? Is it possible that you think it would have given me pleasure to cause Francis distress of mind? or to see the boy I love beyond all earthly objects of affection take a step so ill judged and irremediable as to marry Lucy Lindon?’

‘No, madam—no. I trust neither your brother nor myself were so uncharitable. But we did think that there might be influences—I need not particularise them—brought to bear upon you from without; that there might be some scheme on the part of others to aid and abet the lad in his foolish passion, so that they might acquire authority, or rather power, over him, to be used eventually to their own purposes.’

‘Upon my oath as a Christian, upon my honour as a woman, there was no such scheme, Mr. Freeman. I bear no ill-will to Francis; and I would lay down my life—were it mine to dispose of—to save his son from harm.’

‘That assurance is amply sufficient for me, Miss Talbot, and, I trust, will be so

for your brother. But the deed is more convincing than the word. Will you use your influence with the girl, and at least exact a promise that she will abstain from importuning your nephew, and leave him free to follow the dictates of filial duty ?

‘I will do that at once,’ assented the other eagerly ; then, after a moment’s reflection, added, ‘and if you will kindly give me your address in town, I will let you know the result of my endeavours.’

Though the Rector felt his cheeks burn at this unmistakable suggestion that he should take his leave, he was conscious that he had deserved ill at Sister Edith’s hands. He had the honesty to confess to himself that he had done Miss Talbot wrong. But even yet he was far from doing her justice ; for it was really from no feeling of displeasure that Edith dismissed him, but simply because she thought she possessed a certain authority (not her own) which was wanting to the Rector, and to which she felt that Lucy must needs yield obedience.



CHAPTER VI.

TWO WOMEN.

‘I AM deeply grieved, Miss Edith,’ said Susan Parkes, as soon as the Rector had taken his departure; ‘I am more sorry than words can say that Lucy has repaid your kindness in this manner. I had no idea that she had allowed her folly to go such lengths. Though, at the same time, one should remember—to be just—that it was Master Richard who made the appointment of which Mr. Freeman speaks.’

‘I know it, Susan,’ interrupted Miss Talbot gently; ‘I do not wish, Heaven knows, to defend my nephew at the expense of your niece. My intention is to act for the good of both of them; only to

do so I must know all the facts. I acquit you, of course, of having had any hand in this unfortunate affair ; but if you have any knowledge of it, pray impart it to me. It is necessary in dealing with the girl that I should know exactly how the matter stands.'

'I know nothing, Miss Edith, except that Master Richard wrote to her from Eton, and when he came to town gave her a locket with his portrait in it.'

'With his portrait ! And her mother knew of that ?'

'Yes, ma'am, she did. But I don't think Annie had aught to do with bringing them together down at Swanborough.'

'And your brother ?'

'Miss Edith, you know George,' returned the little woman plaintively ; 'I cannot say whether he has had a finger in this pie or not : how could I ?'

'To be sure ; I understand that. Please convince yourself that I wish to spare you and not pain you, Susan ; only I must know all I can. Lucy is a good girl, so

far as I have seen : but then with me she has always been upon her good behaviour. I don't know what she is really like.'

'Well, ma'am, she *is* a good girl. She has faults, of course : is very masterful and independent ; and thinks she can take care of herself, when it would be much better to trust to her natural guardians and protectors.'

'Do you mean that she has made undesirable acquaintances ?' inquired Sister Edith.

'Yes : that is just what they are--not downright bad, but undesirable.'

'Men or women ?'

'Men. I am not sure, but I think offers have been made to her——'

'Offers ?'

'Yes, Miss Edith ; nothing to be ashamed of, as she will tell you ; but professional offers on account of her singing in the choir. Offers to bring her out on the stage.'

'The stage, on account of her singing in the choir ; oh, Susan !'

‘Yes, Miss Edith. When Mr. Freeman called to-day I almost feared he was come on some such errand. They wear black clothes, and white cravats, you see—these gentry—just like the clergy,’ said Susan simply.

‘Impossible,’ thought Sister Edith: ‘and, indeed, though theatrical managers are in their habits often eccentric, none of them, to my knowledge, has ever appeared before the public in a straight waistcoat of silk, with an apron to match, and a baretta—which was the professional costume, for example, of the Rev. Gerald Vane.’

‘I think, Susan, you might have told me something of this before.’

‘Well, I did think of it, Miss Edith; but in the first place it was not for me to decry my own niece, who moreover was doing nothing absolutely amiss; and in the second place, since you had been so kind about her voice and that, I hardly liked to tell you that the very pains you had taken with her had been the cause of bringing her into undesirable notice. You see, folks

began to go to the church to hear her singing—and perhaps even to look at her pretty face—who would never have gone for a better purpose.’

‘I see,’ answered the other scornfully : the ways of wickedness were not unknown to Sister Edith : though they shocked her moral sense, they did not surprise her. Her conscience, moreover, pricked her because it had not been out of regard for the girl’s own interests, but those of Richard, that she had thus, though unwittingly, placed her in the way of temptation : and perhaps she would have confessed as much, but that that would have been tantamount to an admission that things at St. Ethelburga’s were not always as they ought to be—a supposition to be smothered in its birth. She had acted for the best of course, but it now seemed that it had not been for the girl’s best ; she felt that she owed her reparation, or if that debt could not be paid (as was but too likely), some equivalent for it : and it was with a very different frame of mind from that with which Mr. Freeman

had set about his mission, that after hearing from Susan that her niece was at home and alone, Sister Edith took her way upstairs.

As Lucy was not in the sitting-room, her visitor tapped softly at her bedroom-door. Her first summons was unheard, but the second produced a faint 'Come in,' and Miss Talbot entered accordingly. Lucy had evidently taken it for granted that it was her aunt who sought admittance, for she did not even turn her head, but, seated at her little toilet-table, continued to fix her eyes upon some object before her. This was not her own face (as it might well have been, unless the attraction of beauty is to be denied to its possessor alone), but the face of another—that of a bright-eyed, olive-cheeked boy, set in a heart of gold. She looked up into the mirror, and, seeing her visitor portrayed in it, shut the locket with a startled cry ; but Sister Edith had already recognised the portrait of her nephew.

'This is my own room, Miss Talbot,' exclaimed the girl, rising to her feet, her

cheeks scarlet with rage and shame; 'you have no right to come prying here.'

'Gently, gently, Lucy,' returned Sister Edith, with dignity. 'I knocked at your door, and you admitted me, and I could not help seeing what you hold in your hand. It matters little, since that is the very subject upon which I am come to speak with you.'

'I have already been spoken to about that,' answered Lucy defiantly; 'and I have no answer to give other than that which I have already given to Mr. Freeman.'

'I have nothing to do with what you said to Mr. Freeman. It is true that he had a right to be answered; but I am Richard's near relative, and have, therefore, a still greater right. What will give me still more authority, if you have a real regard for him, is this, that I love him more than any other human creature.'

The girl's face softened at once.

'If that is so, Miss Talbot, you will not be so hard upon me as others are inclined to be, since he loves *me*.'

‘There is no harm in that,’ said Sister Edith slowly, ‘since we should all love one another ; and you and Richard have been thrown together from your childhood. But if you have an intention to become his wife, there would be great harm, Lucy.’

‘Why, madam ?’

‘Well, surely you do not need to ask me why. Would it be right, would it be fitting, for a young man in his position to marry a girl in yours ? Has your bringing-up been such as to fit you for such an alliance ? Nay, more, is not such an ambition on your part directly contrary to the authority of the Church, which teaches us to be content with that station in life to which God has called us ?’

‘The Church is nothing to me, Miss Talbot.’

‘My dear Lucy, you know not what you say. Are the laws of the Creator, then, nothing to you ? nor the book of His laws ? nor the ministers of His will ?’

‘All that has nothing to do with me and Richard, Miss Talbot.’

‘Pardon me, but they have. They have to do with every act of our lives, but especially with so important a one as that which you contemplate. You are not yourself, Lucy, or you would never say such things; and you would call me Sister Edith, as you are wont to do at St. Ethelburga’s, and not Miss Talbot.’

‘I do not feel to you as though you were Sister Edith,’ answered the girl coldly; ‘and is only an hypocrisy to call yourself so. I it will tell you the real reason why you are trying all you can to interfere with me and Richard: you may call it by what name you like, but it is pride. If you were really my sister you would have no objections. But now, because I dare to love your nephew, all the talk that I have heard from you, and the preachings from Mr. Vane, about fellow-creatures, and fellow-sinners, and an equality in the sight of Heaven, turns out to be mere moonshine.’

‘Oh, Lucy, think, think of what you are saying. I don’t mean as respects myself—you are attacking the most sacred things.’

‘And is not love a sacred thing?’ answered the girl quickly. ‘Do you suppose that anything Father Vane, as he calls himself, can say in his pulpit, or that you can say, or that the Bible itself can say for the matter of that, is more sacred—that is, to *me*’ (she struck her breast impetuously)—‘than my own heart’s love? What would life be, say you, without your faith? What would life be, say I, without my love? There is equality there at all events. Nay, matters are even worse for me than you: for if your faith prove false, you would take no harm from having believed; but if my love prove false, I should suffer for having entertained it.’

She spoke with force as well as passion; and, notwithstanding the shock which her feelings experienced, Edith could not help admitting to herself that this girl was no ordinary character, but possessed, it was likely enough, those very talents for the stage for which it seemed some had already given her credit. She was not angry with the girl at all; supreme and divine

pity for one so fair and young, and so dangerously gifted, took possession of her.

‘Dear Lucy,’ said she, ‘you are following false lights held by evil hands, which will, unless God has mercy on you, lead you to destruction. You are a child in years, and more childish than any child—though I fear not so guileless—in entertaining such wild thoughts. I will not speak with you to-day about their wickedness, for you are not in a state of mind to hear me: but they were simply impracticable and out of the question.’

‘That is what Mr. Freeman said,’ answered the girl coldly; ‘your way has been more roundabout than his, but you have come out at the same door at last. You want me to give up Richard.’

‘I want you to give yourself up, to save him.’

‘That is honestly spoken, at all events,’ said Lucy bitterly. ‘I am not to think of myself at all, then.’

‘You would not do so if you really loved him, Lucy. I was supposing that

you really loved him when I asked the sacrifice. I will not even say, what I am nevertheless well convinced of, that your giving him up is as essential to your own happiness as it is to his. I will speak of his interests only. Richard is a mere lad, and a few weeks ago was a boy at school. He has seen little of the world, and nothing of the women in it, except yourself. You were very beautiful; you were very fond of him; what was more likely, what was more certain, than that he should fall in love with you? I will marry him, you say, before he has a chance of comparing me with girls of his own rank in life: at present he does not detect any deficiencies; let him find them out when I have got him safe, and it is too late for him to repent his choice. Mind, I do not accuse you of mercenary motives: I believe you to be above them; you wish to marry him doubtless because you love him; and you believe that he has a genuine love for you—only you have secret doubts about its lasting.’

‘I have no doubt,’ said Lucy faintly,

‘that is, of course, much of what you say is true.’

‘Good girl. Be honest; be true,’ said Edith encouragingly. ‘Don’t fear to tell me all.’

‘Well, then, I will tell you that you are wrong about my wishing—or, at all events, about my determination to make him safe, as you call it. I could make him safe to-morrow—or at least in a few weeks’ time—though Mr. Freeman said I couldn’t.’

‘What? You could marry Richard—boy as he is—without his father’s consent?’

‘Yes, I could. I have been told how to do it; and I could.’

‘Who told you?’

‘That has nothing to do with the matter. Richard has only to come up to town, and after three weeks of residence in some out-of-the-way parish in the city we could be married, and nobody be any the wiser.’

Sister Edith fairly shivered with horror.

‘That must be at some dreadful Register Office, which is as bad as no marriage at all;

and even in that I think you must be mistaken, Lucy.'

'Oh, no; there is no mistake,' answered the girl, with a confidence that was almost scornful; 'and it would not be at a Register Office at all, but all in the regular way by banns in church.'

'But you are not going to do this, Lucy,' pleaded Sister Edith, subdued by the force of circumstances, and also not a little impressed by the air and manner of this mistress of the situation. She had expected to have to deal with a mere village girl, whose head had been turned by flatterers for their own purposes, and who would probably prove as pliable in her hands as she had done in theirs. And, lo, here was a young woman of such a practical turn of mind that she had been studying the marriage laws of the land, or, what was more likely, had been instructed in them by some one more worldly-wise and crafty than herself. Such was not her mother's character: but her step-father, George Parkes, Edith knew to be a man of great audacity, and not un-

likely to have suggested to the girl the readiest means of securing her young lover for life.

‘No, I am not going to do it, Miss Edith,’ answered Lucy slowly. ‘If I was, I should not have spoken to you of the matter, you may be sure. Only please to tell them down at Durnton that I am not going to be threatened or worried by any one; and I won’t have Richard bullied. Let us fight fair, if we must fight. I will take no advantage of his youth and inexperience, as Mr. Freeman put it; I will give him time to make acquaintance with other girls—real ladies of his own class—that he may compare one with the other, as you say, Miss Edith; and if he gives them the preference—let him. Can I say anything fairer than that? As to giving Richard up, unless he asks me to do it—and not under compulsion, mind you, don’t let them try *that*—I would not do it for all the wealth of the Indies, or to be a *prima donna* of Her Majesty’s Theatre to-morrow.’

She spoke with uncommon fire and spirit ; and notwithstanding her ill-fitting and not well-chosen clothes, and with the poor surroundings of her chamber, looked of a majestic beauty. For the first time the sense of her extreme attractiveness struck Sister Edith, who, without a particle of feminine jealousy, was slow to observe the mere charms of person : she felt that if she herself was thus impressed, the power of this girl over an impulsive boy like Richard might indeed be such as to override all considerations of prudence and filial duty. To defy this girl, against whom defiance had at first seemed far too formidable a weapon to be used, now appeared to be to invite defeat. Her very moderation showed a confidence in her own power, which suggested conciliation as much from fear as from any gentler feeling. Edith loved her nephew far too well to be won over, even for an instant, to the girl's view of the matter ; but she experienced a certain admiration for her for which she was at a loss to account, since it was justified

by neither religion nor virtue : and her face unconsciously expressed it.

‘There shall be no menaces and no harsh treatment, Lucy, so far as I can prevent it,’ she said. ‘But, on the other hand, you must promise me not to molest Richard.’

‘Molest!’ echoed the girl, with a proud smile. ‘No, I will certainly not molest him. I will not return to Durnton, let us say, for six months.’

‘Nor seek him elsewhere, in the meantime?’

‘Of course not,’ answered Lucy, with a quick flush upon her cheek. ‘I mean to act straightforwardly; I have no mental—what does Mr. Vane call it?—reservations.’

Edith was too intent upon her point to feel this sarcasm, to which she would have been otherwise sensitive enough.

‘And you will hold no communication with Richard by letter?’ She feared that here she would have met with opposition; she did not know that Lucy had some

doubts about her own epistolary powers, and a disinclination to display them, especially to her lover.

‘I will write Richard no letters, Miss Edith, for six months.’

‘You are a good girl, Lucy; kiss me.’

For a moment, Sister Edith had permitted her mere instincts to get the better of her; and before she could regret the circumstance Lucy had burst into tears and thrown herself in her arms. Nothing more was said on either side; but the elder woman felt, too late, that if she had given way to nature a little earlier, she might have obtained even greater concessions from her whom she could now hardly find it in her heart to call her adversary.

We are all so desperately clever nowadays, or else (which is quite different) so exceedingly high-principled, that instinct is held to be a dead letter: and as for human creatures in one position of life being own ‘flesh and blood’ to those in another, the idea has only to be mentioned (as has been seen) to evoke an incredulous smile. The

philosopher, however, who remarked that 'they didn't know everything down in Judee,' might apply that observation, perhaps, with equal truth, to a more modern country.



CHAPTER VII.

MR. PARKES' VIEWS.

So prompt was Edith in her promised communication to the Rector that he received it by hand at his hotel in time to start for Durnton by the evening train, a circumstance which relieved him from a state of discomfort (only known to those who, being stay-at-homes, find themselves at an inn alone) and begat a genuine sense of gratitude. Her letter was very short.

‘DEAR SIR,

‘Lucy has given her promise not to return home for six months, and during that time neither to seek Richard out nor to correspond with him. This is the most I

could obtain from her. You perceive it does not shut out R.'s coming or writing to *her*.' Here the Rector smiled satirically ; 'set a thief to catch a thief,' said he to himself ; 'she must have learnt these nice distinctions from her spiritual adviser.' 'I think it right to add,' he read on, 'that all harsh measures should be avoided with R. Indeed, it was only on that understanding that L. came to terms at all. She is in possession of the fact that it is possible for minors to be married by banns without consent of their parents.' The Rector started ; he saw at once that this was possible, though the circumstance had escaped him, and it was bad news indeed. 'Pray believe that I sympathise with all my heart with Francis in this matter, and will do all I can to aid him.

'Yours faithfully,

'EDITH TALBOT.'

It had cost the writer a little struggle to thus subscribe herself, but she had rightly judged that her usual signature of 'Sister

Edith' would have aroused the Rector's prejudices. As it was, as we have said, he felt grateful to his correspondent, and quite believed in her protestations of alliance as respected Richard.

In the meanwhile that young gentleman was not having what his friend Mr. Greene would have called 'a good time' under the paternal roof. His father said 'Good-morning' when he met him in the breakfast-room, and that was all. Dick was much alarmed lest his own conduct should form the matter of the usual extemporaneous discourse after family prayers, and listened to them with a most unwonted and anxious attention; but so far his father spared him. On the other hand, his silence seemed to proclaim that he was most grievously offended with him. The fact was that Mr. Talbot thought it wiser to say nothing to his son about the matter which had so much annoyed him, until he should have learnt the issue of the Rector's visit to town. This was most unfortunate as respected Richard, full of resentment that he could

not show, and of wild schemes with respect to Lucy that he now knew to be impracticable. The statement dropped by the Rector the night before, and which had all the more weight with him since it had been advanced less as an argument than a truism, that a minor could not marry without his parents' consent, deprived him of all power of action. Without any inclination for submission, he had not, it seemed, an opportunity to rebel. It would have been a relief to him if his father had put himself in a passion, and abused him in round terms; for to be treated with this silent displeasure had something of contempt in it as well as of disapprobation; and he was indignant beyond measure that his love for Lucy should be treated with contempt. He would prove even yet, if it were possible, that it was not a mere flower of the field to be cut down or left to wither, but a vigorous growth that should bear fruit. The reason of this stubbornness of spirit did not lie in Richard's character—which was rather reckless than obstinate—

so much as in the mode of his bringing-up; which had not been that of most boys. If he had not been positively his own master, he had been suffered to follow his own bent in most things to an unusual extent, and especially when at home. It is possible too that, without absolutely detecting it, he felt the inconsistency of his father's conduct in letting him associate with Lucy so long and unreservedly, and being now so angered at its natural result. He had no particular regard for her step-father, except as a companion in his field-sports, nor did his affection for her mother exceed a certain natural tenderness; but in his present extremity his heart turned towards them as to his natural allies.

As soon as breakfast was over, and his father had withdrawn himself into the library, Richard started for the spinney. He purposely took the way through the village, first because he wished his visit to be as public as possible; the time for secrecy had now gone by, and he wanted everybody to know that he was not

ashamed of his Lucy ; and secondly, because he dreaded the village gossip that must needs arise on account of his sudden return from Masham, and wanted to 'get it over.' He had, however, credited rumour with greater celerity than she possessed (at least in Suffolk), for it was evident, though some of the good folks expressed surprise at seeing him at home so soon, no one had any idea of what had happened. Even Mrs. Parkes, whom he found alone at the cottage, was quite unaware of what had brought him there.

'Well, now, Master Dick,' said she, in her gentle way, 'it is really very good of you to come and see your old foster-mother. I had no idea you were to be back at Durnton so soon. If you had come yesterday, you would have seen Lucy—though she was only here for a few hours.'

'I *did* see her—at Swanborough,' said Richard, flushing. 'There has been a row about it.'

'A row !' cried Mrs. Parkes, with a certain quick tremor that was habitual to

her. 'Oh, I hope nothing serious; how could Lucy have been so foolish!'

'It was not your daughter's fault at all, Mrs. Parkes.'

'Thank Heaven for that. Not that she would mean to make mischief; she is too good a girl. And how could you help meeting her if so it happened?'

'I met her on purpose, Mrs. Parkes—by appointment. I mean to meet her whenever I please; for she is to be my wife.'

'Oh, hush, hush, Master Dick! Your father would never forgive us if he knew you said such things.'

'He does know it; that is what the row is about.'

'You have surely never, never dared to tell him,' cried the poor woman, her frail frame trembling like a leaf. 'He will never give way; it is impossible. I always told her so, and George likewise. You should not have come here, or be seen having anything to do with us. Go, go——' and with her thin hands she strove to push him to the door.

‘No, Mrs. Parkes. I am not ashamed of Lucy, nor of you——’ he was about to add ‘nor of your husband,’ but even his excitement could not carry him to that length. ‘I thought you might have heard something about it, and that George might give me some advice as to what is to be done.’

‘Master Dick, you must not go to my husband for advice,’ whispered the woman huskily. ‘I must say *that*, if he kills me for it; his advice would be your ruin. I have known what he has been at all along in this matter; though Lucy herself knows nothing of it. You must not listen to him. If your father were dead, and you were your own master, then things might be different.’

‘That would be doing behind my father’s back what I dared not do before his face,’ said Richard proudly. ‘I don’t wish my father dead, but I mean to marry Lucy. If he chooses to disinherit me, let him.’

‘You talk like a child, Master Dick. You don’t know what disinheritance means;

you don't know the trials and pains of poverty, nor yet the stings of one's own conscience, when one feels that one has thrown away the happiness of our lives for a mere whim.'

She spoke with rapid eagerness and vehemence; and it would have been plain to an older man that she was speaking from her life's experience; but Richard was only thinking of his own case.

'My love for your daughter is not a whim, Mrs. Parkes; and at all events I am prepared to pay its cost. That is my own look-out.'

'Not altogether, even that,' answered the other quickly. 'George and I will be turned out of house and home at once. You will cause our ruin to begin with; though that, God knows, was not the first thing I thought about. Can you and Lucy keep *us* as well as yourselves?'

'I hope my father will do nothing so unjust as that,' said Richard gravely. The idea of three persons becoming suddenly dependent upon him, who had nothing but

a superficial knowledge of Latin where-with even to make his own way in the world, staggered even him.

‘Your father *will* do it, Master Dick, and I can’t say unjustly. My husband—here he comes down the lane ; don’t say a word to him of what I have said, but lay it to heart, as you hope for happiness.’ And with trembling hands she began to dust a chair.

‘Hullo, Master Richard ! what, *you* here ?’ cried the swarthy master of the house ; ‘my old woman has made you welcome, I’ll warrant ; but if you had been here yesterday, you would have seen——Why, what’s the matter with thee, lass ?’ he broke off roughly, for Mrs. Parkes had been unable to restrain her tears.

‘Well, everything is the matter, George. The Squire has found out—I mean some one or another has been telling him—about our Lucy and Master Dick.’

‘Some one or another ? Let me know his name !’ exclaimed the giant sternly. ‘If it’s that sneak Jonathan, the under-

keeper, I will cut his weasand for him. He shall tell no more tales.'

'No, no ; it's not Jonathan, nor anybody else,' said Richard. 'My father has found it out of his own head, and I am come to talk to you about it, George.'

'All right, Master Richard, let's come and talk then out of doors——for some people,' here he looked at his wife with great disfavour, 'are so foolish and namby-pamby that they are afraid of their own shadows, and try to make other people as frightened as themselves. Come out, Master Richard, and let us hear the worst of this little matter, and may be,' added he, lowering his voice to a confidential whisper, 'the best of it too.'

The two men sat down, therefore, in the cottage porch, with the door closed behind them, thus cutting off Mrs. Parkes from hearing their deliberations, just as Indian braves are wont to leave their squaws in the wigwam, when they hold a council.

That one of the councillors, at least, was bent upon the war-path was evident from

his appearance. The gamekeeper's swarthy face was a shade darker even than usual; his heavy brow was puckered with a frown; and his tone when he began to speak had at least as much of hostility in it as of encouragement.

‘Look here, Master Dick, you’re in a tight place, no doubt; but don’t you go for to show the white feather. If other folks are cutting up rough with you, you have George Parkes for your friend, remember—a man as has allus counted for two in a scrimmage.’

‘You always think that everybody is to be knocked down, George,’ exclaimed Richard, with irritation; ‘a quarrel with one’s family is not like a row with poachers.’

‘I am not so sure of that, sir,’ returned the other doubtfully. ‘One’s own family are very often poachers; and for my part I have found the very remedy of which you speak so lightly, very useful. However, different cases require different treatment, no doubt. Now just tell us all that has happened.’

Richard therefore narrated everything that had occurred within the last twenty-four hours with respect to Lucy and himself, honestly taking upon himself the whole blame of their meeting at Swanborough, and expressing his intention to stick by her, come what might; at the same time, he by no means understated the obstacles that had opposed themselves to this line of conduct, and especially spoke with respect and regard for his father's views on the matter, while announcing his intention to oppose them.

‘It is very natural, George, my father should be angry with me, and I wish from my heart that things had not turned out as they have done, at least at present. He looks on me, I can see, as little better than a schoolboy, and one that doesn't know his own mind; and I don't want to be advised, mind you, to fly in his face.’

‘Certainly not, Master Richard; dooty to one's parents is a very good thing,’ observed Mr. Parkes approvingly. ‘Only there's something in the Scriptures, you

know, about giving the go-by to father and mother and all the rest of them, and cleaving to the girl of your choice. You mustn't let nobody frighten you as though they had the whip-hand, when they haven't got it.'

'Nay, as far as that goes, they *have* got it,' returned Richard. 'Lucy and I have not a shilling between us to marry upon; and even if we had, we couldn't do it, as Mr. Freeman pointed out to me, without my father's consent, until I come of age.'

'Ha, ha! the parson said that, did he? When you get to my age, Master Richard, you will not be so ready to believe in what the parsons tell you.'

'But isn't it true, George?'

'It's a lie, my lad; it's a lie. You could marry Lucy in a month, all right and regular; and if they turn rusty you shall, too, and then you can snap your fingers at them. Of course, there will be a little money wanted, because you'll have to live for three weeks somewhere, while the banns are being published, on your own

hook. But Lucy will have two hundred pounds of her own when she comes of age, and I know a party as will advance her something on that spekilation.'

A flush of triumph and expectancy for a moment came into Richard's face, but it looked grave enough as he replied, 'I don't wish to make any breach with my father, George, unless it cannot possibly be avoided. He has been very good to me all my life, and I am his only son.'

'That's just it,' broke in the other eagerly; 'there's where you have the pull. It isn't as if you had any brother, so that the Squire could say, "Well, Bill or Tom shall have my money, and Dick shall have nothing and be hanged to him, since he chose to take his own way." When the knot is once tied between you and Lucy, he must needs make the best of a bad job, and forgive you, don't you see? Of course there's me and the old lass, yonder—especially me—whom he will have to stomach a bit; but, bless you, George Parkes knows his place. He ain't the

man to be going up to the Tower every afternoon, and saying, "Well, I'm just come to take pot-luck with my son-in-law, Mr. Talbot, or smoke a pipe with him on the Terris."

This picture of what might happen, though avowedly imaginary, struck Richard with considerable force, and had an effect quite different from that intended. He could not help portraying to himself his father's face on the reception of such a visitor, especially on a Sunday, which was the day Mr. Parkes chiefly devoted to calling on his friends and partaking of their hospitality.

'That would not do, of course, George,' he said bluntly. 'I think in case I was to marry Lucy, you would have to go away from Durnton.'

'With all my heart, my lad : though it sounds curious that I should have to cut my moorings beside an old friend (if I may so call you), just because I have become related to him. However, it is you and yours, of course, who have to be considered

in this matter. Only I must stand by my girl and her rights.'

There was a menace in his tone which Richard was quick to catch, and he resented it.

'As to Lucy, George, I think it is my affair at least as much as yours. You are no kin to her, and have never shown her, I believe, any extraordinary affection.'

'I love her like the apple of my eye, Master Dick, though I may have been hasty with her now and then; of course I was not speaking of *you* as likely to play her false; but I am her natural protector, and bound to see that others do not put upon her; that's all.'

The tone of the speaker was conciliatory, but by no means fawning, and even the pretence of affection that he made for his step-daughter had a cynical ring in it. Richard was well aware that 'there was no love lost between them,' for she had expressed to him the relations between herself and her step-father in that very phrase.

'What I am afraid of,' continued Mr.

Parkes, 'is that when they come to put the screw on you, Master Dick, you will not stick to her.'

'I will never give Lucy up, I tell you,' answered the lad vehemently.

'Ay, but you must stick to her *now*; they will be for separating you, I reckon; for sending you abroad, and me and the missus and Lucy to Jericho.'

'Then I shall join you in Jericho,' said Richard, rising from his seat.

'That's bravely said; give me your hand upon it, Master Dick. Keep your head back, and fight low, and when they come within striking distance hit out, my lad, and I'll stand by you.'

Greatly comforted by which sage advice and promise of succour, Master Richard returned home.



CHAPTER VIII.

TEMPORISING.

ON the morning after his return from town the Rector presented himself at the Tower, at an hour so early that it was some time before the house-bell gave its usual summons for family prayer. He knew that he should find the Squire in the library, deep in his books, or what was more probable, sunk in thought with some unread book before him. He understood his friend as thoroughly, perhaps, as it is possible for one man to understand another, who nevertheless has his own secrets. He knew that he was gloomy, taciturn, and self-involved—things all contrary to his natural disposition—and that the vision

of the next world was seldom absent from his inward eyes. But he did not know that his nights were well-nigh sleepless, and his days disturbed by a scruple of conscience, nor the reason of it. The religious mind, although some well-meant attempts have been made to prove the contrary, is naturally austere ; and to the Rector, the nature (as he took it to be) of the subject of his friend's contemplations was a sufficient explanation of his character. Even the eccentricities of his conduct he set down to a theological cause, termed by persons of his way of thinking 'the old man ;' certain ruling passions which assert themselves in a modified form, no matter how sanctified and chosen is the human vessel to which they belong.

'This is kind of you, Freeman,' was the Squire's salutation to his friend ; 'you have been very prompt in your errand.'

'Don't speak of that, Talbot. I came early to speak with you apart from Richard. How has the lad borne himself ?'

'He has been silent ; but I have pur-

posely avoided giving him an opportunity to speak with me till I saw you.'

'Have you sent for his friend Greene?'

'Yes; he will be here this morning.'

'That is well. It is with Richard that we shall have to deal in this matter, and not with the girl at all.'

'Not with the girl? You have found her reasonable then?'

The Rector shook his head.

'I cannot say that: she is fixed enough upon her point. But there is at least no immediate danger to be apprehended from any act of hers.'

'Well, we know that; for four years to come Richard is protected from her wiles by the law itself.'

'That is a mistake of mine; he is not protected, and she knows it.'

'What, can my boy be ruined by this creature, for life, just as he has crossed its threshold? It is impossible.'

'It is improbable, but not impossible. We must be very cautious and patient

with him. He has something of your own resolute and vehement spirit. I must entreat you not to apply any injurious epithets to this girl in his presence, for, to some extent, if I am not much mistaken, she will be your ally in this matter.'

'My ally! My gamekeeper's daughter my ally, and in her designs upon my own son! The girl must have bewitched you, Freeman.'

The Rector winced, for that was the very observation—accompanied by some much stronger ones—which his Dorothea had made to him when he informed her, in guarded terms, of the very moderate success of his enterprise.

'No, Talbot, she has not bewitched me; my views upon this unhappy matter are quite unaltered; but in some respects we have misjudged her. Her object, however much it is to be deprecated, is not mercenary; nor in a bad sense can she be called designing.'

'You have been talking with my sister Edith,' exclaimed the Squire suddenly.

The Rector winced once more ; his Dorothea had jumped to the same conclusion, though from a different standpoint. Conscious of her own weakness in respect to county families, she had accused her husband of having submitted to aristocratic influence.

‘I have seen Miss Talbot, but I am positively convinced she has nothing to do with this affair. She assured me most solemnly that all her sympathies were on your side, and that she would do her best for us in Richard’s interests.’

‘And you believed her?’ answered the Squire bitterly. ‘You, a man who know what these Jesuits are, and who caution others against them, have been thus hoodwinked! I could not have believed this—though I could believe almost anything of them—if I had not heard it with my own ears.’

‘You would have believed your sister had you heard her with your own ears,’ answered the Rector, with some asperity. ‘What has she to gain by causing your

son, for whom she has a sincere affection, to disgrace himself?’

‘I don’t know,’ returned the Squire contemptuously. ‘I don’t pretend to know. Who can enter into the hearts of these idolaters and hypocrites? Perhaps she does not know herself; she is only their tool. But that they should have thus twisted a man like you round their fingers——’ and the Squire threw up his hands in astonishment and horror.

‘Indeed, sir,’ said the Rector, with a red spot on either cheek, ‘it is you who are twisted, warped, and biassed in your mind, so that it rejects all reason. The girl is altogether out of your sister’s control, and indeed any one’s control.’

‘What! do you mean to say that this girl, who is not designing, you say, found, out of her own head, that it was possible to marry my son, though a minor, otherwise than in the usual way?’

‘That is certainly a circumstance that puzzles me, but I am quite sure that your sister was not her informant. From

Richard's manner the other night, I am pretty sure he does not share her knowledge of the fact, and that is something.'

'Something!' said the Squire, striding hastily up and down the room. 'And I am to trust to his not being enlightened to save him from immediate disgrace? You have brought me cold comfort indeed, sir.'

'I have brought you, Talbot, what comfort I could. It is no use to give way to passion, however natural. If ever one may be angry, and yet sin not, I allow that it may be so in your case; but I am convinced that it would be most dangerous to take strong measures with either the girl or Richard. She has promised neither to see nor write to him for the space of six months. A great deal may be done in that time towards weeding him of this folly. And for the present it is most important that he should not be left to himself to brood or scheme. That is why I am so solicitous about the coming of his young friend.'

The Squire took a letter from his pocket

and tossed it over to the other. 'That is from Mr. Greene, who seems to have an intelligence beyond his years, and some good feeling also.'

The Rector read as follows :

' Private.

' The Manor, Masham.

' DEAR MR. TALBOT,

' I shall present myself at Talbot Tower to-morrow morning. I quite understand what I am wanted for, and shall do my best to further your wishes, for I feel that in so doing I shall be acting for the good of my friend your son.

' Yours very truly,

' ROBERT GREENE.'

' That "I quite understand what I'm wanted for" is frank, at all events,' observed the Rector dryly. He had heard more about Mr. Greene from Richard than the Squire had, and entertained a strong suspicion that he was very flippant.

' I don't mind a little straightforward-

ness,' observed the other. 'It shows he is at least no Jesuit. In my opinion he should go straight to the point with Richard.'

'If you mean by that to use strong measures with your son, you will, in my opinion, Talbot, be making a great mistake.'

'If I speak to him at all, I must speak out,' said the Squire.

'Then don't speak to him at all; let me do the speaking for you. Of course, I should not propose this if we had an equal knowledge of this affair; but I have had the advantage of seeing this girl, and you have not. I do assure you it is a case, not for compromise of course, but for temporising.'

The Squire had in the main a great confidence in the Rector's judgment, and he was conscious that the vehemence of his own feelings prevented him from taking a judicious view of the position. If it had not been for his discovery that his friend had held speech with his sister, he would not have hesitated for a moment in ac-

ceding to the other's proposal ; and after a few turns up and down the room, during which the Rector kept a judicious silence, he did accede to it.

‘ You may take your own way, Freeman, though it seems to me a monstrous thing that a father may not point out to his own son the consequences of wilful disobedience to his wishes.’

‘ I shall certainly not omit to mention them, Talbot—nay, to insist upon them ; but they should not, in my judgment, be put in the foreground. Here comes the young gentleman himself.’

Here Richard entered the room. His face was pale and grave, and, though it looked resolute enough, wore also a certain air of anxiety. Upon seeing that his father was not alone, he stepped back towards the door. The Rector at once understood that silence and suspense had become intolerable to the boy, and that his intention had been to have the matter ‘ out ’ which had estranged him from his father.

‘ A letter has just come from your friend

Greene, my boy,' said Mr. Talbot, 'in answer to one I wrote to him, inviting him to pass some time with you at the Tower, and you will be glad to hear that he will arrive this morning.'

'You are very good, sir, but——,' the lad was about to say that no companionship, however agreeable, would turn him from the matter on which he had set his heart, or cause him to forget it for a moment, when he caught sight of the uplifted finger of the Rector, accompanied by what mathematicians term 'the negative sign,' indicated by a movement of that gentleman's head. Quick as thought he changed front in the face of the enemy, and added, 'But I fear, father, you will find my friend's stay here somewhat troublesome.'

Mr. Talbot waved his hand impatiently; it meant, as Richard knew, 'What is trouble compared with the mischief that you are contemplating?' and stalked gloomily out of the room.

'Your father does not wish to be spoken

to, Richard, upon the matter, which, as I guess, you came to discuss with him this morning. He has delegated the whole affair to me. I went to London yesterday, at his request, and had an interview with the young person——’

‘You have seen Lucy?’ exclaimed Dick, with an eager air.

‘Yes, I have seen her, and had a long talk with her. I am bound to say she seems to me, for her station of life, a very decent young woman, and not unreasonable.’ This was, it must be confessed, but faint praise, and what was more, by no means the sort of praise most welcome to Richard.

‘If you mean by “reasonable” to imply that she has consented to give me up, I don’t believe it, Mr. Freeman.’

‘You are unnecessarily discourteous, Richard,’ answered the Rector, with dignity; ‘I implied nothing of the sort; but the girl at least understood that it would be very selfish and wicked of her to discredit you (and still more herself) by any more

such meetings as that at Swanborough. She perceives that it is only fair (to use no stronger word) that you should see a little more of life, and your sphere of it before seeking to exchange it for a lower ; that you should learn to know your own mind, and keep it undisturbed by the promptings of mere passion ; and therefore for the present, at all events, that is to say for six months to come, she consents to hold no communication with you either by word or letter.'

'It is incredible ; I must have it from her own lips before I can believe it,' cried Richard precipitately.

'That is impossible,' answered the Rector ; 'she has given her word, as I have just said, to the contrary.'

'Then I shall write to her by to-day's post, and if I don't hear from her within twenty-four hours I shall know my letter has been tampered with : and in that case I shall go to her.'

The air and tone with which these words

were spoken would have befitted an Imperial Ultimatum, and they had a force for the Rector, of which the speaker was quite ignorant. He thought of that possible marriage by banns—in the district, perhaps, of Shoreditch—and trembled.

‘My dear Richard,’ said he, in a more conciliatory tone, ‘you should know your father too well to suppose that under any circumstances he would stoop to intercept a letter. You may write, of course—if you can reconcile it to your sense of duty to do so—but I must again remind you that Lucy’s promise must prevent her from replying. She has the good feeling to see that no influence of hers ought to be brought to bear upon you for some time to come : that you should be left to yourself, and the promptings of your own conscience.’

‘You would persuade me that she has been convinced by mere arguments,’ said Richard naïvely, ‘and that I am sure she never can have been. Though it is possible, from what I know of her, that she

has consented to put my fidelity to the test.'

'Yes, that is it,' said the Rector eagerly. 'She sees, of course, that it is—to say the least of it—quite possible, as your judgment matures, and you have the opportunity of seeing more of the world, that you will acknowledge to yourself that you have made a mistake in this matter.'

'And if, after six months, I find I have made *no* mistake,' returned the lad, 'am I to understand that my father will be more inclined to yield to my wishes?'

'My dear Richard, remember what the Scripture says, "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof."'

'I don't see the application of that to my case, Mr. Freeman,' answered the other dryly. 'I understand that I am expected to do as you suggest, but not what I am to get by it.'

'Get by it!' echoed the Rector, justly indignant as he tried to persuade himself at Richard's indifference to the sacred text, but in reality irritated by the lad's ob-

stinacy, at the moment, too, when he had seemed to be yielding ; ‘ that is a strange question for a son to put who is asked to comply with his father’s wishes. I am bound to say that even the girl herself did not put the matter on so low a ground.’

‘ That was because she was thinking of my interests, and not her own,’ Mr. Freeman. I shall certainly not permit you to take advantage of her unselfishness.’

This flight in morals was so far beyond anything that the Rector had expected in his young friend, that it fairly staggered him. It convinced him for the first time that the matter must needs be serious, since the contemplation of it could have effected such a mental revolution.

‘ No,’ continued the lad, after a pause, ‘ I am not going to be caught in a trap. I don’t wish to be rude, Mr. Freeman, but I must have some more certain evidence of Lucy’s wishes than your bare word. I shall write to her by to-day’s post—and I must have an answer.’

‘Will you take your aunt Edith’s word?’ said the Rector desperately.

‘Aunt Edith!’ cried Richard quickly. ‘Does *she* know about this? Has *she* spoken to Lucy?’

‘I am quite sure that for your sake she *will* speak to her,’ answered the Rector gravely; ‘and through her, you can receive the information you require.’

‘Then that will do,’ said Richard. ‘I will believe Aunt Edith.’ The young gentleman’s tone was not only contented but joyful. He did not know, of course, that his aunt was already committed to the other side; and he flattered himself that he could write such an epistle to Lucy as, being shown to Edith, would move her to favour his cause. The Rector’s reticence, however judicious, was not perhaps very straightforward, and moreover he had determined to use a similar reserve with the Squire; it would never do to tell him that he had obtained his son’s consent to the present arrangement by calling in such an ally as Sister Edith. In his own mind,

he felt an ample justification for this conduct, which was after all merely prudential, and for the best of ends ; but if Father Vane had behaved so, it would by some people have been called Jesuitry.



CHAPTER IX.

‘TOMMY’ GREENE AT DURNTON.

AT breakfast nothing was said concerning Dick’s affairs, but that young gentleman understood from his father’s manner that the result of his interview with the Rector had been communicated to him, and was held to be satisfactory.

‘I am afraid your friend will find the Tower a little dull, Richard, after Masham,’ said the Squire; ‘but we must do what we can for him. He can take his choice of the horses.’

‘You are very good, sir,’ answered Dick, smiling—and it was his first smile for four-and twenty hours—‘but I don’t think he will put your kindness in that way to the

test. He does not care for horses. I never saw Henry Pole so angry (but once) as when Greene endeavoured to prove to him that the horse was the most stupid, nervous, and dependent of all animals, and infinitely inferior to a second-rate cat. Tommy—that was Greene's nickname at Eton, sir—is not a sporting character, and was quite one by himself, as it were, at Masham.'

'Indeed, then the Tower may not be so distasteful to him, if at least he is a reader.'

'Well, yes, sir ; he has read a lot, I believe.' Richard knew that he had 'read a lot,' but expressed himself thus doubtfully for fear of arousing groundless expectation. He had a suspicion that Tommy's tastes had not led him into the same paths of literature that the Squire patronised ; and this view proved subsequently to be correct.

The expected guest happened to arrive during Richard's temporary absence from the house, and was ushered, as usual, into the library.

‘Mr. Greene, I am very pleased to see you,’ said the Squire frankly; ‘and, indeed, sincerely grateful to you for your presence.’

‘Don’t mention it, sir; delighted, I’m sure,’ answered the other.

‘I fear you will find the Tower a change for the worse after Masham.’

‘I think not, Mr. Talbot; for, in the first place, I see you have printed books. Except a work in manuscript, upon cookery, belonging to Miss Latour, and a volume on farriery, with a supplementary treatise on (I think) glanders, in the possession of Henry Pole, I have not *seen* a book for these three weeks.’

‘All that are here are at your service, Mr. Greene; I have a pretty extensive theological library.’

‘Ah, the Fathers,’ observed Mr. Greene, who was nervously afraid of a dissertation; ‘I am sorry to say that they are not much in my line.’

‘You need not be sorry on that account, Mr. Greene,’ replied the Squire; ‘in my opinion there is far too much authority

accorded to them, and too much attention altogether paid to that branch of literature.'

'Quite my view,' said Mr. Greene, his eyes running over the serried lines of books, and finding not a single work whose title looked in any way promising; indeed, for the most part, they were utterly unknown to him even by name.

'That is the history of the great controversy between Calvin and Servetus,' observed the Squire, following the direction of his gaze.

'Ah, they were rather rough upon Servetus,' observed Mr. Greene lightly.

'Rough upon him?' echoed the Squire interrogatively.

'Well, they burnt him, didn't they?'

'He was certainly put to death for his errors; but that was to prevent their spreading. Unhappily we cannot kill *and* cure.'

'Pigs,' suggested Mr. Greene, 'are an exception to that theory.' He looked as grave as a judge (which was his way, when not convulsed with mirth); the Squire compelled his mouth to form a smile.

‘You have wit,’ he said, in a tone which might more fitly have expressed, ‘You have a touch of leprosy.’ ‘From what Richard tells me, I conclude you are also a scholar.’

What Mr. Greene thought to himself was, ‘Then Richard has been lying;’ but what he *said* was, ‘Your son and I have read some classics together;’ and so they had; taking turns which should read the original and which ‘the crib.’

‘You will find the Greek authors on yonder shelf. Some of them are no doubt meritorious; but, as I understand (for I am no scholar myself), others are very far from edifying.’

‘There are queer things in Lempriere, no doubt,’ assented Mr. Greene.

‘I believe, and hope, that I do not possess that author,’ said the Squire; ‘I do not see it on the shelf.’

‘The proper place for it,’ observed the other; he could not help flashing out these little volleys any more than a summer cloud can restrain its sheet-lightning.

‘Yes; it would be here if anywhere,’ returned his unconscious host. ‘I believe it is partly owing to these ancient writers that our lads are made so——so——’

‘Precocious,’ suggested Mr. Greene.

‘Just so. Now, in poor Richard’s case, with which you are better acquainted doubtless than myself——’

‘Never saw the young woman but once, upon my honour,’ interrupted Mr. Greene, alarmed at being considered an accessory before the fact.

‘To my knowledge, I have never set eyes on her,’ said the Squire, in a tone which seemed to imply ‘and I trust I never shall.’

‘Well, you have missed something then : she is really very pretty. If a woman can look well in a pork-pie hat, with a bird-of-paradise feather in it (or something like it), one must allow she must look well in anything.’

‘A pork-pie hat, with a bird-of-paradise feather in it!’ repeated the Squire, with a groan. His memory, straying far back

into his unregenerate days for some parallel to this decorative style, had served him perhaps only too well.

‘That is the head-gear in which I saw her at Swanborough,’ observed Mr. Greene, in mitigation; ‘but it may not be her usual attire, and even if it is, bad taste in dress is not an unpardonable crime, Mr. Talbot.’

The Squire shook his head. The pie and the bird were to him the external indications of inward worthlessness; and yet, perhaps he was less troubled than if the other had convinced him of the girl’s good sense and virtue; for that would have seemed somehow to suggest that his objections to the match were not insuperable.

‘Has Richard ever spoken to you, Mr. Greene, about——about this miserable attachment of his?’

‘I never heard of it, sir, till I saw the lady. And yet it is not Dick’s way to be secretive. That is what puzzles me more than anything in the matter. It is my impression that some third party has been

pulling the strings.' And Mr. Greene performed that pantomimic action, with which every one who has seen the late Mr. Charles Mathews in the 'Game of Speculation' is familiar.

'Ah! and whom do you suspect?'

'Well, Mr. Pole tells me the young lady has a step-father who is up to anything; but then again, it seems, he is, or was, opposed to the Game Laws, and of such a person Mr. Pole would say anything.'

'No, no, it's not Parkes,' said the Squire thoughtfully. 'He has not the head for such a plot—— Well, at all events, I can rely upon your co-operation, Mr. Greene, in our efforts to save my son from ruin. Even if the object of his affections were all we could wish her to be, the idea of a lad of Richard's age falling seriously in love would, you perceive, be quite preposterous.'

'Utterly ridiculous,' replied the other confidently. 'He had been just six months older than his friend, when he had proposed in form—though his intentions as we know

had been misunderstood—to Miss Meredith, through her uncle.

Upon the whole, Mr. Talbot was well satisfied with his young guest, and had ‘got on’ better with him than would probably have been possible under other circumstances. His trust, too, in his fealty was well grounded; for though impulsive in the conduct of his own affairs, Mr. Leonard Greene was, for his years, astute (he called it ‘leary’) in worldly matters, and he could be prudent enough in the affairs of a friend. Unfortunately, however, he had too high an opinion (though natural enough, considering its effect upon himself) of the power of ridicule; and, since that weapon adapted itself to him very readily, was much too prone to use it. If he had been laughed out of his proposal to Miss Meredith, how much more (he reasoned) should Richard yield to ‘chaff’ in his relation to the game-keeper’s daughter.

‘Well, Dick, and how *is* she?’ were the first words with which he greeted his old schoolfellow.

‘How is *who*?’ replied the other, blushing, but speaking with great dignity.

‘Why, your Dulcinea del Toboso, of course; Miss Lucy Lindon, of Durnton Regis.’

‘She is very well, I believe,’ returned Dick, in a tone like that of a refrigerator endowed with speech.

‘You *believe*? Come, that’s a good one. Do you mean to say you don’t write to her every day?—that you are not going to write to her this very morning?’

‘As it happens,’ replied Richard, ‘I *am* going to write to her this morning.’

‘Of course you are; give her my love. By-the-bye, I am charged with all kinds of tender messages for you from Masham. Even Miss Latour sent her compliments, and Pretty Poll’ (which was his name for Margaret Pole) was quite effusive.’

Poor Dick, though oppressed by his relatives and deserted by his friend, had still a kick left in him.

‘And what,’ he inquired, ‘did your Miss Meredith say?’

‘*My* Miss Meredith! Well, I believe she wishes you as well as anybody.’

‘*You believe?* Come, that’s a good one. Do you mean to say you don’t know every thought of her heart?’

‘Well, well, that’s a fair hit,’ said Mr. Greene, changing colour, however, as though he had undergone that form of punishment for lower boys at Eton called ‘a punch in the wind;’ ‘only our cases are not quite parallel, Talbot. Miss Meredith is a lady born——’

‘Oh, I thought you didn’t believe in birth and blood and all that,’ interrupted Richard cynically. ‘I have heard you call it “rot.”’

Here again he had ‘neatly put in his left;’ for Leonard Greene, like most exceptionally clever boys, possessed democratic opinions, which he sometimes found difficult to reconcile with certain instincts of another kind.

‘Well, of course they are “rot,”’ answered he, with irritation—‘that is, with respect to all ordinary things, and to all

men who are worth speaking about. But with women it is different ; they are not strong enough to be independent of "position." There's something about a lady—dash it ! I don't know what it is ; but you must have observed it yourself—at all events, you can see very well where it's wanting ; and it's a miserable thing, my dear fellow, you may depend upon it, to be ashamed of one's wife. Marriage stands quite on a different ground from anything else ; it's like the advertisement of the Funeral Company, "Feelings of relatives consulted," etc., etc. One must be respectable on some occasions, and marriage, depend on it, is one of them.'

'Thank you,' said Richard. 'I shall never be ashamed of Lucy ; and when I marry her I shall be doing nothing that is not respectable. Will you have a cigar ?'

'By all means,' said Mr. Greene, who felt he had done his duty even if nothing had come of it, and that he deserved some relaxation.

‘My father has some very good weeds, though he himself doesn’t use them.’

‘That’s odd,’ said the other thoughtfully; ‘since you tell me he says he is “a brand plucked from the burning,” he certainly ought to smoke.’

Amicable relations thus being re-established, Richard showed his young friend over the place, and among other objects of interest, the Rectory, of the tenants of which he spoke with a frankness peculiar to his age. ‘You must see Freeman and his wife sooner or later,’ he said, ‘and you may just as well get it over at once.’

Mrs. Freeman welcomed her visitor with effusion, as she would have welcomed any guest of the Squire’s; but her interest in Richard and his escapade compelled her to give him most of her attention, and so Mr. Greene was handed over to the Rector. As they walked in the garden, there was an opportunity for a private word or two.

‘We are glad to have you at Durnton, Mr. Greene, at this crisis in Richard’s life,’ observed the Rector significantly. ‘We

have every confidence that your influence will be exerted for his good.'

'Well, I'm dead against his making a fool of himself, of course,' said Mr. Greene modestly.

'It is, unhappily, worse than folly,' sighed Mr. Freeman. 'I had hoped that in sending him to Masham his budding affections would have been led into a proper channel. Now, if it had been Miss Pole, or even Miss Meredith.'

'Just so,' said Mr. Greene, with a ghastly smile, and muttering to himself, '*Confound* his impudence!'

'It is *so* important that, on coming to man's estate, we should entertain some virtuous attachment.'

'You married your first love, then, Mr. Freeman?'

'Hush,' whispered the Rector hastily, for his wife was within three yards of him, and his companion had purposely raised his voice. 'This is certainly,' thought he, '*the* most forward young man I ever met with.'

Then, Mrs. Freeman having pumped Richard as dry as she could, took her other guest in hand, and proceeded to sink her Artesian well in *him*.

‘You found Masham very gay, no doubt, Mr. Greene ; I fear you will find you have exchanged quarters for the worse in that respect.’

‘Not at all,’ answered he politely ; and, indeed, he had already found a good deal of humorous amusement at Durnton.

‘Charming old gentleman, Mr. Pole,’ said she—‘if it wasn’t for his queer goings on. He is very much thought of in the whole county.’

‘That doesn’t prevent his thinking of himself a good deal,’ observed Mr. Greene.

‘That is true ; yet we must consider his position. It is unique. There will be nobody exactly to fill his place when he is gone.’

‘No *one* person could do it,’ assented her companion dryly.

Mrs. Freeman did not understand this.

‘And Mr. Henry Pole is charming, too,

in his way,' she went on ; ' there is such an air of distinction about him.'

' He smells very distinctly of the stable,' said Mr. Greene acidly ; he liked few of the men at Masham, and the young squire least of all.

' That is true, again ; horses have been the ruin of that family. Horses and dogs and—— so on. One forgives, however, a man in Mr. Pole's position for being horsey. It is in a woman that one particularly dislikes such tastes. Is it true that Miss Meredith rides to hounds ?'

' She rides after them, I believe.'

' So I have heard. Now how sad that is ! How dear Margaret Pole could have chosen such a young woman for her friend, I can't imagine. Now, *my* dear girls—— I have lost one of them by death and one by marriage——'

' There is always danger in leaving home,' interpolated Mr. Greene, in much embarrassment.

' Home ? How do you mean ? As to dear Dorothy she never left me, and was

wooded and won beneath her father's roof—— Well, Richard, if you must go, you must. But I hope you will bring your friend—he belongs to the Greenes of Leicestershire, I conclude——'

Mr. Greene nodded; his father had been a drysalter on Tower Hill; but he was 'not going to be let in for another moment's conversation with that woman,' as he subsequently expressed himself.

'You must bring your friend to see us again, Richard,' observed Mr. Freeman, 'and I hope, some day, to partake with us of a family dinner.'

As soon as they had got out of the house, Richard asked his friend what he thought of his new acquaintances.

'Oh, the man is terrible, though very funny: but the woman—I suppose it's her moustache" (Mrs. Freeman wore a little one) —" I couldn't understand half she said. I am certain I made some terrible mistake about what she told me of her daughters.'

'She said she had "lost one by death and one by marriage," didn't she?' said Dick. 'She tells everybody that.'

‘That was it, by Jove!’ returned Mr. Greene, slapping his slender thigh. ‘I thought she said that she had lost one at Bath and one at Norwich.’

How those young gentlemen did roar together over that little mistake.



CHAPTER X.

A FUTURE FATHER-IN-LAW.

As dirt has been described (by a competent authority) to be matter in the wrong place, so good-for-nothing people would often be of some utility if they were placed in different positions, and *vice versâ*. If Peter the Great, for example, instead of being the Czar of Russia, had happened to be a coal-heaver, he would certainly have passed most of his days in prison, and probably ended them on the gibbet. His self-will and brutality would not have been pardoned to him, and there would have been no opportunity for the display of his abilities. Similarly, to compare small things with great, Mr. George Parkes, of Durnton

Regis, about whom history (save this humble record) is silent, and whose name had never appeared in print except in respect of petty sessions in connection with offences against the Game Laws, might have been a great man, had he been born in the purple. He had an iron will, and was utterly without scruples. He had the courage of a lion, and the cunning of a fox. He was faithful to his friends (before he lost them) to an extraordinary degree, for though he loved himself beyond anything and everybody, he would never 'round' on them, and escape out of a difficulty at their expense. If instead, therefore, through circumstances over which he had no control (one of which was his temper), of finding his hand against every man's, and every man's hand against his, he had found men's hands at his autocratic disposal, he would have probably cut a remarkable, though never a respectable figure in the world. It would have been rank blasphemy to have said so in Suffolk, where they were held in very

different estimation ; but the fact was, Walter Pole and George Parkes were cast by nature in very similar moulds, and of the two the gamekeeper was the more estimable. He had much more 'character' than the Squire of Masham, and very bad—to judge by common report—it was.

Mr. Leonard Greene had heard so much about him, and all to his disadvantage, at the Manor, and especially since Richard's escapade, that he longed to make his acquaintance on his own account, independently of the interest that attached to him through his (proposed) connection with his friend. Mr. Greene had a keen eye for character, and though himself of a gentle and even fastidious disposition, could tolerate a good deal in his fellow-creatures, thanks to his ever-mastering sense of humour—that precious gift which makes even ruffians endurable to him who possesses it, and the absence of which in the gentler sex is the cause of no little of their unhappiness and discontent.

'Talbot,' said Mr. Greene, on the

second day of his stay at the Tower, 'I should like to see Mr. Parkes.'

'Do you mean my father's gamekeeper?' answered Richard, with a quick flush. 'What is the use of it? There are no partridges yet, and besides, you never shoot.'

'Once I shot for nuts, at a stall in Bachelor's Acre,'* observed Greene, plaintively; 'still, as you scornfully suggest, I am no sportsman; but that is no reason why I should not make the acquaintance of Mr. Parkes.'

'You are curious about him because he is Lucy's step-father,' said Richard gloomily. 'If you are thinking of making fun of him, you'll find it rather a dangerous experiment.'

'Fun of him! My dear Talbot, I am astonished at you,' returned his friend, with gravity. 'I shall treat him, of course, with very particular respect. That I am curious to see him is true enough, and surely natural enough. I don't wish to allude to a subject which it is tacitly understood is

* Where Windsor Fair used to be held.

closed between us ; but don't you see how utterly impossible you represent your position to be with respect to this girl, if you are ashamed of even exposing her relations to the human eye ? He is not a black man, is he ? And even if he were, that wouldn't matter, as he is not to be a blood relation.' This style was so natural to his friend, that Richard was not annoyed at it ; and he felt his argument to have some force.

' I am not ashamed of Lucy's father, of course,' said he, ' who, after all, is, as you say, only her step-father. We will call upon him after luncheon to-day, which is his dinner hour.'

And accordingly they did so. They arrived at the spinney just as its inmates had concluded their midday meal. Mrs. Parkes was clearing the table, and her lord and master enjoying a glass of hot grog with his after-dinner pipe.

' Glad to see you, young gentlemen ; Annie, put chairs,' was his welcome, given not without a touch of dignity.

‘ This is my foster-mother, Greene,’ said Richard, introducing his friend to his hostess. ‘ She does not object, you see, to tobacco.’ Mrs. Parkes, always neat and very comely, with a certain air too of refinement (which was partly perhaps submissiveness born of ill-usage), set about making little preparations — *i.e.*, more tumblers and hot water—for the comfort of her guests, with cheerful alacrity. Fortunately she did not understand the situation (as her more acute husband did at once), or she would have been nervous and ‘ off her head.’

‘ Sit you there, sir ; it’s out of the draught,’ said she gently ; ‘ and Master Richard, this is your place, as you well know.’

‘ I ought to know, at all events, Mrs. Parkes ; I’ve been here often enough,’ said Richard, smiling, though ill at ease. ‘ Your cottage has been a second home to me.’

‘ A very poor one,’ returned his hostess modestly. ‘ It must be very pleasant to

have this young gentleman with you at the Towers.'

It was curious that the poor people, even including the young squire's foster-mother, always called the Tower the Towers.

'Yes; it's rather dull there, unless one has a friend of one's own age for one's companion.'

'But you had a mounseer there the other day, had you not, Master Richard?' inquired George. He made the remark in an indifferent tone, but he meant it to have its significance. Everybody at Durnton who had ever heard of De Blaise believed him to be the Squire's natural son, and Mr. Parkes intended to suggest that mesalliances, although, indeed, irregular ones, were not unknown in the Talbot family; he had the sagacity to perceive the force of a precedent.

'Oh, the young Frenchman,' said Dick, not perceiving this stroke of policy, nor even understanding that a reflection upon his father was intended. 'He was with us

but for a day or two ; and I hope my friend will make a good long stay.'

'I never heard of the Frenchman,' said Greene. 'Who is he?'

'A son of an old friend of my father's,' said Dick, with a quick flush; for he was aware of the popular view of their relationship.

Mrs. Parkes blushed also; and her husband, who was looking straight at Mr. Greene, deliberately closed his left eye. He could not have expressed his meaning more clearly if he had exhibited the Talbot Family Tree, with *all* its branches.

'Frenchmen are very clever fellows,' observed Mr. Greene, with that prompt instinct to rescue the party from embarrassment, which is (quite erroneously) supposed to be the peculiar property of the female sex. 'I was reading in the paper yesterday a striking example of it. In Paris, it seems they take purses just as in England we catch fish. The sportsman takes his seat in an omnibus, furnished with a line of thin but strong black silk, with a shot

at the end of it. When a neighbour takes out his *porte-monnaie* he throws his fly—that is the shot—into it, unperceived, and when the victim puts it back in his pocket, it is to all intents and purposes in that of the sportsman. He has only to pull at the silk, and the shot acting as a hook, he lands it.'

'That's very neat,' said Mr. Parkes approvingly: 'but, lor bless yer, we're just as crafty in London. I once—that is a friend of mine did—got an Isle of Skye doag, quite as cleverly. We had been after that doag—I tell the story as he used to tell it—for weeks, but its missis knew its valley and kep her eye on it. At last he worked the oracle. Her husband got the office—found out where it was I mean—and come down to our place in the Borough. He was a sporting sort of fellow, and took a common-sense view of the matter. "You've got the doag, I know," sez he, "and you want five pounds for it: very well, here's the money, and mum's the word. But I just want to know, for my

own satisfaction, how the deuce you got that doag. My wife, she will take her oath there was not a man in sight when she lost it, and she had seen the doag at her heels but a few seconds before. Come, if you'll tell me, I'll stand glasses round."

' "Well," says my friend, "as you're of the right sort, and also since one never plays the same game twice (at least with the same party), I'll tell you. Your missis says as there was no man in sight when her dog was picked up, but was there no *woman*?"

' "Not a soul, except a milkwoman," says the gentleman, "and she didn't see nobody take the dog neither."

' Well, I dare say she didn't ; that milkwoman was my gal, you see ; and she had the dog herself at that moment in an empty milk-pail. Which was just the way how it was done.'

The young gentlemen were delighted with this narrative, which Mrs. Parkes was far from being. Some wives always fail to appreciate their husband's anecdotes, no

matter how humorous they may be. This arises sometimes, no doubt, from their having heard them once or twice before ; but in this case there seemed a deeper reason.

‘Don’t tell such shocking stories, George,’ exclaimed she reprovingly. ‘You will almost make the gentleman think that you thought it right to steal the dog.’

‘My dear madam,’ said Mr. Greene, ‘I think the ingenuity displayed by your husband’s acquaintance ought to have been rewarded by fifty dogs.’

‘It was certainly very clever,’ said Dick reluctantly.

This stimulus of praise, assisted by that of a second glass of gin-and-water, was not without its effect on Mr. Parkes. To steal a dog was with him no greater offence than to kill a flea ; indeed, he would not have stooped to the latter crime, for fleas were both familiar to him and welcome—they never troubled him. Having found an appreciative audience, he could not resist the opportunity for display—a common weak-

ness, but one which it is often injudicious to indulge.

‘Clever!’ said he contemptuously; ‘oh, that’s nothing to some of the little games I could tell you about.’

‘Oh, do tell us,’ exclaimed Mr. Greene; ‘I love games—especially of skill.’

‘Well, there was another London friend of mine—leastways, an acquaintance—who, between you and me, would sometimes crack a crib.’

‘Crack a *what*?’ inquired Richard with irritation, for he had a presentiment that Mr. Parkes had much better hold his tongue.

‘Oh, I understand,’ said Greene; ‘he had a weakness for entering houses that were not his own, and snapping up any unconsidered trifles.’

‘Just so,’ said George, with an approving nod; ‘you know a thing or two, I see. He was a housebreaker.’

‘Oh, George,’ cried Mrs. Parkes, ‘how *can* you!’

‘Nay, how could *he*? Mr. Greene here has told us about the omnibus trick as was played by a friend of his——’

‘Quite so,’ put in that young gentleman airily; ‘this happened in a higher walk of business, that’s all.’

‘Well, it was a more dangerous walk, at all events,’ resumed the narrator; ‘he had to look where he was going, I can tell you, before he took a single step. Well, there was one house in the suburbs as he was very sweet upon; only they kep’ a doag—not a Isle of Skye one like the other, but a tarrier, the very wust sort o’ doag as could be kep’ for my friend’s purposes; and a deal of trouble he had before he could give him “toko.”’

‘Send him to sleep, I suppose?’ conjectured Mr. Greene.

‘Aye, for a good long sleep,’ continued the other grimly, ‘but it was done at last—clever. Then my friend he got into the house all right, but a little too early; the tenant kep’ very late hours, and matters went so unfortunate that hanged if he wasn’t drove to hide under the man’s bed.’

‘What, with the man in it?’ inquired Mr. Greene, with intense interest.

‘Well, not at first ; but he came to his room, and undressed, and went to bed, and there was my poor friend underneath it.’

‘That must have been a very embarrassing position,’ observed Mr. Greene, with sympathy.

‘He was in a blessed state, sir, I do assure you. However, he lays still, and when the man began to snore he creeps out. Somehow or other, however, he made a noise, and the other awoke. “Gip, gip,” says he, thinking it was the doag, “where are you, old dog?” He put out his hand in the dark to feel for him, and what d’ye think my friend did? Well, *he licked his hand*, and the man thought it *was* the doag, and went to sleep again. Now, that’s what I call a clever trick, and equal to any Frenchman’s.’

‘It was simply charming,’ exclaimed Mr. Greene, with rapture. ‘I should have liked to have known your friend.’

‘Well, you may, perhaps, some day—who knows?’ said Mr. Parkes, with a grim

chuckle. 'It was certainly a queer start, that was.'

The entertainment of one's friends would be an easier task than it is, if they were guaranteed to have the same tastes, moral and intellectual, as ourselves ; but as matters stand, such is the fastidiousness of some folks, that what is a very good story indeed in a host's opinion, is sometimes in that of his guests a downright bad one. It was the misfortune, for example, of Mr. George Parkes to regard all forms of robbery with too charitable an eye, and to see humour in everything, not excepting burglary with violence.

His present audience might have been considered a safe one, since it consisted of the wife of his bosom, well accustomed by this time to moral shocks ; his would-be step-son, who might naturally be expected to take things in good part ; and Mr. Leonard Greene, who had openly shown his appreciation. But, as a matter of fact, poor Mrs. Parkes was horror-struck : she had never heard her husband talk with

such audacious frankness, at least before his third tumbler, and trembled for the effect upon his audience; while Richard had listened to his vivid details with the same feelings with which a gunpowder manufacturer might regard a display of fireworks in his immediate neighbourhood. His apprehensions were only partially subdued, even when it was all over, by his friend's expressions of satisfaction.

'Curious fellow, old Parkes, is he not, Greene?' had been Richard's tentative remark, as they walked home together from the spinney.

'*Very* curious,' answered Mr. Greene. 'Tells stories capitally. One would almost think he was relating them out of his personal experience.'

'Ah, about the dog and the milk-pail. Well, it's just possible it was so. George was very wild and queer in his youth, I believe: but all that's over now; and though his circumstances are, as you see, very humble, there is nothing to be said against his respectability.'

‘Poor, but honest, eh?’ said Mr. Greene dryly. ‘Well, you ought to know him better than I. Still I think it was rather strong to tell us that story of Mrs. P. No. 1 in the presence of Mrs. P. No. 2. It wouldn’t be nice for her to hear that the previous possessor of her husband’s affections used to prig Skye terriers in her milk-pails.’

‘Yes, but George exaggerates so; and then one must make allowances for people’s views. At Eton, for instance, one bags another fellow’s tea and sugar and thinks nothing of it. You told me yourself that even at your club you can never feel sure of your umbrella; and perhaps in the circle in which old George used to move, it was thought rather fun than otherwise to “annex” dogs.’

‘But then there was the other dog,’ observed Greene gravely.

‘You mean about the burglary,’ said Richard, turning very red. ‘Oh, that was of course a joke. You don’t suppose that George was telling that story, even if it ever happened, of himself.’

‘If he wasn’t, he ought not to be a gamekeeper,’ returned Mr. Greene gravely; ‘he ought to give his attention exclusively to writing Fiction. If that was not a fragment of autobiography, “call me horse,” and you know how little I think of the horse.’

‘What ridiculous prejudice,’ returned the other with irritation. ‘Why, supposing for a moment that the thing was auto—whatever you call it—do you suppose that the man would be such an idiot as to tell it to *you*?’

‘My dear boy, George Parkes is not an idiot: very far from it; but not only does he not entertain the same view of morality as other people, but he hardly knows what their view *is*. No doubt there was a little bravado—and more gin-and-water—in his frankness, but he had no idea that he was—my jingo’ (here he burst into a fit of laughter), ‘think of his telling such a story as that to your father!’

‘Well, he wouldn’t do it, of course. I am, moreover, quite sure it was only his fun.’

‘But if it *wasn't* his fun? If Mr. George Parkes has been at one time, as the police call it, “a thief, or a companion of thieves”—what then?’

‘That is what *I* say,’ answered Richard vehemently, ‘What then? A man may go to the dogs at one time, I suppose, and yet come back again.’

‘No, Richard,’ said the other thoughtfully, ‘the dogs won’t let him do that; they will be always at his heels, believe me; especially at this man’s heels,’ added Mr. Greene with an irresistible impulse, ‘because he’s a gamekeeper.’

Richard laughed aloud; not so much because he was tickled by the joke, as to relieve himself from a sense of oppression; his friend’s words had gone deeper than Greene himself had imagined; but half the force of them had been thrown away by his ill-timed pleasantry.

‘Oh, George is all right now, you may take your oath, Tommy,’ said Richard lightly. ‘If it wasn’t so, I should not be thinking of you-know-what so seriously.’

And, indeed, between ourselves, Lucy is such a trump that in that case she would not be thinking of it either. She and I have had some talk about this very matter. She would think that her love would disgrace me, if—if—her step-father should “break out” into his old ways.’

‘I like her for that,’ said Greene simply ; but he added to himself, ‘I don’t like her phrase of “breaking out” though ; it is only used for drunkards and gaol-birds.’

‘Yes, and you will like everything about her when you come to know her. And as for George, the old fellow is now as straight as a die.’



CHAPTER XI.

THE INWARD STRUGGLE.

IT could not be said that Mr. Greene was 'all things to all men' for the sake of any great end, but so far as that apostolic gift itself was concerned, this young gentleman undoubtedly possessed it. An invincible tendency towards drollery would at times break out, and imperil established relations, but, as a rule, he got on even with the gravest persons. With hypocrites he could no more mix than oil with water, and, indeed, like chemicals which have no affinity, when they met one another there was generally an explosion, but so long as a man was genuine he was rarely offended with Leonard Greene. The worst of this

was that serious people would sometimes entertain hopes of him when there was really no hope.

The Rev. Giles Freeman was one of those who fell into this snare. That good man perceived that this young gentleman was given to lightness, and flattered himself that he could supply him with ballast ; and though Mr. Pole had warned him that the Rector would 'talk a dog's tail off,' Mr. Greene, like a lamb (albeit a very frolicsome one), submitted to the well-meant ministrations of the shepherd. Mr. Freeman had not forgotten that young M. de Blaise had left Durnton as good (or bad) a Papist as he had come there ; and if an opportunity lost can never be recovered, it certainly makes one keep a sharp look out next time. Mr. Greene had in controversy expressed an admiration for Miss Talbot's character, founded, of course, on what he had heard of her from her nephew ; it had had no reference to her opinions—unless the phrase, 'a regular trump,' could be held so to apply—but any text suffices for a good preacher.

‘Miss Talbot is, as you imply, by nature a good woman (if any person can be called by nature good)’ was the Rector’s reply, ‘but unhappily she is in the Cimmerian darkness of spiritual error.’

‘Nonsense!’ said Mr. Greene; it was his way of expressing astonishment, and merely meant, ‘You don’t say so?’ but its effect upon strangers was sometimes unfavourable. It was so in this case.

‘You are speaking in jest I trust, Mr. Greene. You cannot seriously believe these errors to be of no consequence.’ It was only by being a patient listener to the Rector’s eloquence for the next twenty minutes that Mr. Greene atoned for his imprudence, and felt that he had reached level ground again.

Then he began to make way in the other direction.

‘You were speaking of extreme unction, Mr. Freeman’ (the Rector had been speaking of everything relating to the Romish faith), ‘which reminds me of an anecdote connected with that ceremony. It is not

thought right among the very High Church Catholics that any person having received that sacrament, on what of course is supposed to be his death-bed, should ever recover. The same sort of feeling, I suppose, that is entertained by doctors when they have given one over, with a religious objection added ; it is flying in the face of the Church. When the luggage is labelled, it must go by the train, and should not be removed from the platform.'

The Rector smiled. He was not averse to 'Ridicule when arrayed on the side of Truth.'

'Well, it so happened that several persons in the sacred city were sacrilegious enough to recover after they had received this last attention, and scandalised the faithful by mixing with the world again like common men. A secret society was therefore instituted among some young gentlemen of extreme ecclesiastical opinions to put a stop to this bad practice. They visited the sick—not quite in the usual sense, though it was for their good, but

with the object of making sure of persons supposed to be *in extremis*. When the last consolations of the Church had been administered to any one, they polished him off.'

'This is worse than anything I could ever have imagined!' said the Rector, with pleasurable excitement.

'Fact, I assure you. All went as merry as a funeral knell for some time, only it presently happened that one of this excellent body fell sick himself and was given over by the physicians. Then the priest came to administer the last rite, and while he was about it the patient lifted up his eyes and saw a friend of his (who he knew had something in his pocket for him) looking on through a crack in the door.'

'Serve him right,' said the Rector parenthetically.

'No doubt,' assented Mr. Greene, 'but that was not the sick man's view of the matter. He whispered to the priest, "Don't leave me, and send for a policeman." His wishes were obeyed, and he told every-

thing. He blew on the society, and it burst up. It was allowed that its intentions were good, but that the carrying out of them led to inconvenience.'

'A most interesting and significant example of the evils of priestcraft,' said Mr. Freeman gravely; and he made a note of the anecdote, to be used for the edification of his congregation when the narrator should be far away.

By this simple means Mr. Greene—who had an eye for such short cuts—found the shortest road to the good opinion of the Rector; and similarly he succeeded more or less in ingratiating himself with the other good folks at Durnton, not excepting the Squire himself.

Singularly enough this social success of his (though Richard under any other circumstances would have been proud of his friend's achievements in that way) did not bring the two young gentlemen into more intimate relations. When one's school friend has come to one's house, and been introduced to one's people, and made a

favourable impression, the bonds of friendship are generally drawn tighter, and confidential relations more clearly established. But Richard withheld his confidence as regarded matters relating to his 'beloved object,' and for this very reason that Leonard Greene got on so well with the Squire and the rest. He had from the first, as we have seen, opposed himself to Richard's wishes, and the footing he had obtained in the family seemed to that young gentleman like an alliance with the enemy, to be used perhaps to his own detriment. Thus, much of the usefulness which had been expected from his stay at the Tower was denied to Mr. Greene; while his arguments (now that Richard held him as an irreconcilable) probably did that young gentleman more harm than good. But, on the other hand, his presence at Durnton was of incalculable service in diverting the young Squire's attention, and preventing him from brooding over that hope deferred which makes the heart sick—and especially love-sick. What he would have

done, even as matters were, had not Lucy herself enjoined him to patience, it is hard to say ; for he had not a soul to confide in concerning the subject which chiefly occupied his thoughts—a very dangerous condition of affairs for any lad when that subject is a young woman.

He had carried out his intentions of writing to Lucy, and a portion of the contents of the letter, especially the phrase ‘ I am always yours, and shall remain so for ever ’—which had perhaps been framed for that purpose, just as a dexterous (and favourable) critic will insert a few passages for newspaper quotation—had been shown to Miss Talbot ; and she had replied, as agreed upon, by proxy :

‘ MY DEAR RICHARD,

‘ I have seen a part of your letter to Lucy. She bids me to thank you for it, and to say that she reciprocates your regard. At the same time, she sees the justice of giving you a fair and clear opportunity of knowing your own mind in so im-

portant a matter. I think of her so highly that, if she could measure the extent of the misfortune which would befall you in case your wishes were accomplished, I feel sure she would give you up. Your heart too, Richard, is so sound, that if you would consult it on this question soberly, and without passion, I am confident that you would not oppose yourself to your father's authority, and to the advice of all who love you, among whom, be sure, is

‘Your affectionate aunt,

‘EDITH TALBOT.

‘P.S.—Do not suppose I do not see much to admire in your fidelity ; but, alas ! I can only say of it that it is worthy of a better cause.’

This letter Richard generously placed in the Rector's hands, because he knew that he would show it to the Squire, and naturally concluded that it would cause him to regard Edith with kindlier eyes. Perhaps, too, though so opposed to his own views, he thought it would at least place Lucy's

character in a good light, while at the same time it treated his passion with a seriousness which his father had all along denied to it. As it happened, it had not any of the desired effects.

‘Edith is parleying with him, Freeman,’ said the Squire angrily, when he read this epistle. ‘She should have told him that he was mad and wicked. The idea of the woman’s saying that she admired his fidelity—admired his fiddlesticks!’

‘My dear Talbot, that is just because she is a woman. For my part, I think the letter does her great credit. Her opinions are, of course, abominable; but she wishes well to you and yours, and will do all in her power to help you.’

The Squire uttered an ejaculation of contempt, but nevertheless the Rector fancied he had been moved. If he had seen him during the next half-hour, as he paced the room alone with his own thoughts, that suspicion would have been more than corroborated. He had retained the letter,

and was holding it in his hand. 'The advice of all who love you, among whom, be sure, am I,' he kept repeating to himself. 'Well, perhaps she does love him; what then? She loves others better, and at least regards their interests with greater solicitude. And in this particular case she may be honest—honest.' Here he stopped, as though the word had suggested another train of thought. 'Yes, I was honest: I did not merely do it for the best; I did not do what I thought evil that good might come of it. I did right for right's sake. It was mine by rights. And this woman is a Jesuit, or, if not, she is in the hands of Jesuits, from whom may Heaven defend us!'

He spoke with earnest gravity, without a touch of passion, though it was plain his very soul was stirred within him.

Most great thinkers—those their opponents call Freethinkers—are almost always men who from an early age have thought for themselves.

‘ They fought their doubt and gathered strength ;
They would not make their judgments blind ;
They faced the spectres of the mind,
And laid them ;’

or very nearly laid them (they scarcely do so quite). And, similarly, our great Believers are those who have applied their minds from an early age to spiritual matters, and strengthened their faith by study. Our Bigots, on the other hand, have usually done their thinking (what little there has been of it) late in life. They have come suddenly upon something which seems to them a novelty, and even a peculiar revelation ; they are attracted to it by an irresistible force, and its contrary has always the attraction of repulsion. The admirable witticism which defines Dogmatism as grown-up Puppyism is true to the core in politics, and in theology the fact is somewhat similar. Francis Talbot had been no puppy, but he had been an ignorant, dissolute, and thoughtless man until the sudden change had come upon him, which had transformed him to—a bigot. From that

moment (notwithstanding that much of good had thereby accrued to him) the springs of right and justice had been stifled within him—but they were not extinct. He felt them now rising with force and vigour, and the natural ties of blood were working with them; the struggle between these allies and his second nature was more severe than it had ever been. It was his wont on occasions of doubt and perplexity—on much less important ones than the present—to appeal upon his knees to Heaven for guidance. But this he did not do now—he did not dare to do it; nor did he venture to ask himself why it was he did not dare. In the end, that second nature of his held its own—the door in his heart that he had shut against his sister was not forced: but lock and hinge had suffered in the assault, and were somewhat weakened, though it still showed its old grim front. The inward struggle, too, had cost the Squire dear: as when two armies contend within some neutral district, the flocks and herds are slain, the crops de-

stroyed, and Nature's bounty for years to come is rendered profitless, so it was with Francis Talbot when the stronger of the two contending powers of his soul had won the day—their battlefield, himself, was left well-nigh desolate, and robbed of years of life.



CHAPTER XII.

MR. PARKES BECOMES IMPATIENT.

IF the policy of Richard's friends, with respect to his unfortunate attachment, could not be said to be crowned with success, it had certainly been thus far successful, that no immediate danger was to be apprehended; if there were no visible signs of the young gentleman's recovery, there were evidences as time went on that he had begun to think of other things than the Beloved Object. He was interested in the going to Cambridge in the October term, where he was to be at the same college as Leonard Greene: the latter young gentleman having consented to remain at the Tower, there was no disruption of con-

tinuity in their relations with one another, and the University and its ways became a topic of interest between them that never palled.

‘When he once gets there,’ said Greene to the Rector confidently, ‘I believe he will forget all about the girl.’

‘Especially if he would only form a virtuous attachment,’ urged Mr. Freeman, reverting to his panacea.

‘I cannot undertake to provide him with *that*,’ answered the other, secretly convulsed with mirth; ‘but we will do the best we can for him. I should not recommend him to read too much. When fellows read, their attention is so easily diverted. They are naturally glad to let their book drop and think of anything else.’

‘I hope that is not the usual experience,’ said the Rector dryly.

‘Well, one speaks as one finds, you know. In Talbot’s case, I think a daily plunge in the quiet pool—it’s only a shilling pool—would be more beneficial.’

‘Let him bathe by all means,’ answered the Rector innocently; ‘whether he pays a shilling or a guinea is no sort of consequence.’

‘Just so,’ assented the other stolidly. ‘This man, who does not even know what “Pool” is, will some day be my death,’ he added to himself. ‘I shall burst, and nobody will ever know that I have perished for my friend.’

The aims of these two young gentlemen as to their educational course were identical, which was of itself a bond between them. They had neither of them the most distant intention of ‘reading,’ in the University sense. They meant to get their degrees of course—Mr. Greene’s guardian indeed had stipulated for that when he placed him at college—but their primary object was to enjoy themselves. Richard of course had his Lucy to think about; but the prospect of unlimited boating, and billiards, and going out with the drag (‘You can do *that* if you’re fool enough,’ said Mr. Greene) began to have considerable attractions for him.

Without directly expressing any opinion upon the matter—once only indeed after that first time did he open his lips even to the Rector upon the subject of Lucy Lindon—the Squire was understood to be well satisfied with the state of affairs. His health, it was now become obvious to all eyes, was very far from what it should be, and to Richard formed some excuse for his continued reticence and sombre manner. When the time came for the lads to go to college, he exhibited an unwonted feeling on parting with his son.

‘You will be a good man : you will do nothing, I feel sure, to disgrace yourself—nor your father ; God bless you, dear boy,’ were his last words.

Richard understood their significance well enough ; but though he felt them to be an infringement of the truce agreed upon, he did not object to them. Doubtless his father’s pale face and hollow eyes had their effect upon him, and also the knowledge that his maintenance at College had been provided for with almost impru-

dent liberality. There had been some discussion on this matter between the Rector and the Squire: the former suggesting that too great a command of funds might be a temptation to the lad to follow his own bent as regarded Lucy: but the other had rejected that idea with scorn.

‘My boy may be headstrong, and very foolish, but he is a gentleman; he will never make use of his father’s generosity to defy his father’s wishes.’

And Mr. Greene, who was also consulted, concurred.

‘There is no baseness about your boy, sir,’ said he to the Squire simply.

Nor was there any, in spite of those little affairs in connection with the headmaster of Eton, and the pawnbroker in Windsor.

All Richard’s friends, in fact, were in good hope of him, save one. Mr. George Parkes was very far from pleased that Richard had proved so tractable, and had even ventured to express his disappointment to the young gentleman himself.

‘I did think, Master Richard, as you had had more pluck in you than to be talked over by a parcel of parsons and people who only want our Lucy to slip through your fingers. And it’s likely enough she will slip through, if you go shilly-shallying after her like this. It ain’t the sort of way a girl likes to be treated,’ said he, with an air of experience that was doubtless not unwarranted by facts.

‘Well, what would you have me do?’ Richard had answered with irritation. He knew that the man had private ends to serve in whatever advice he had to offer: but, strange to say, in George’s presence he always felt himself as it were nearer to Lucy, and more inclined to regard his project as practicable. The ‘parsons and people’ were not without their suspicion of this, but to dismiss George from Durnton was considered dangerous, as likely to precipitate matters.

‘What would I have ye *do*? Why act like a man,’ he replied; ‘not like a child as is afraid of the birch. If I’d been in

your place she should ha' been Mrs. Richard Talbot afore this.'

'Yes, but you are *not* in my place,' answered Richard, striking the hedgerow with his stick (they were talking together in the little lane that led down to the spinney cottage and nowhere else, which made it well adapted for private conversation); 'that is just the point which you lose sight of. There are considerations in my case which you don't understand, but which must needs have their weight with me.'

'That is very fine; but I don't think it is your own notion, Master Richard,' observed Mr. Parkes dryly. 'You allow things of that sort to be put into your mouth, though when there is a sweet, pretty cherry bobbing against your very lips, you haven't the courage to swallow it. The matter is your affair, not mine; but I should like to have seen you happy with the girl of your choice, and now I perceive that will never be.'

'Ah, like the rest then—notwithstanding

you pretend to believe I love her—you think I shall forget Lucy when I get to college. I am told I have only got to look about me to see scores of pretty girls as nice as she.'

'No, I don't think you'll forget her, Master Richard,' answered the other quietly, 'and I am quite sure you will find no one at college, or anywhere else, to hold a candle to her as to beauty and that; but I do think there is great danger of her forgetting *you*. A woman's a woman, even though she may be the best of her sex, and the suitor at her side has always a pull over the lover at a distance—especially if he don't even write to her. It is true that your separation is Lucy's own arrangement; but then there are some things in which a girl likes a man to show a spirit even in opposition to her wishes; a pretty girl says, "Don't," when she wants you most to kiss her. And so, in spite of her prudence, I am afraid Lucy is growing a little impatient.'

'How do you know?' inquired Richard sharply.

‘Well, that’s neither here nor there: perhaps I don’t know, but have only my suspicions. But what I do know is that she could already take her pick of half-a-dozen young fellows—aye, and young gentlemen, too—for half London is wild about her beauty. And though she don’t encourage ’em—not a bit of it—yet——’

‘Well, what?’ struck in the lad impatiently.

‘Well, all I means to say is that if I intended to make that girl my wife, Master Richard, I should look sharp about it.’

No more definite statement than this could be extracted from Mr. George Parkes: his warning remained dark as a sibyl’s; but it had at least part of its intended effect, inasmuch as it made Richard exceedingly uncomfortable, and greatly dashed the pleasure with which he looked forward to his college life.

Strongly as Mr. Parkes had stated his views upon this affair, and often as he repeated them during the next three months,

he was neither so vehement nor so importunate in the matter as he would have been had he only dared. He liked Richard, as well, perhaps, as any other person beside himself; but then his self-love, like Eclipse in the race, was first, and the rest nowhere—the other likings were distanced—out of sight. Or if such an image, though classical, may offend the straitlaced, let us take a mathematical one. His self-love was integer one—distinctly No. 1—and all his other loves and likings in the tenth place, or worse, among the decimals.

One of the many characteristics that would have fitted the man to take a lead in the world, had nature but given him a good start, was his inordinate selfishness, to which all other things and persons were but subordinate in his own mind—only unhappily they could not always be made so with the strong hand; his sovereign will lacked subjects, and therefore was compelled to dissemble. Mr. Parkes had certain private reasons—pressing ones—besides those which were obvious to all

acquainted with the case, why the two young people in whom he took such a fatherly interest should be irrevocably united to one another, and the young Squire's lukewarmness or pusillanimity disgusted him. He was secretly full of contempt of him; for, putting himself in his place, he felt that he would have acted so very differently, and with complete success, so far as the present gratification was concerned, beyond which he never looked. This contempt, however, he dared not disclose to the object of it; but had to confine himself to expressing it to his wife, which was some comfort, because he knew it distressed her.

‘This white-livered foster-son of yours,’ he would observe, between the whiffs of his pipe, ‘has not the pluck of a ——’ mentioning a diminutive insect seldom seen and as seldom spoken of in polite circles. ‘He has no more backbone in him than a jelly-fish.’

‘He has been always very kind to me,’ the poor woman would plaintively reply.

‘Kind to *you*. There you are again with your infernal selfishness! Who the deuce cares’ (only he personified the Evil Principle of the schoolmen, and even identified the locality in which it is supposed to abide); ‘who cares about his kindness? The point is, why don’t he marry the girl? I’m her natural guardian, and have the right to insist upon it. And why don’t I?’

Poor Mrs. Parkes knew very well why he didn’t. Namely, that if he did, the whole affair would be at once knocked on the head, instead of dying a natural death (as she felt sure it would do); but though weak in character, she was not so foolish as to express this opinion. Experience had at least taught her reticence.

‘Well, George, you don’t wish to be hard upon poor Master Richard, I’m sure, or make a breach between him and his father.’

‘Yes, that’s it; I’m too soft hearted,’ said Mr. Parkes, with a reflective air. ‘Some men would have had his blood for not behaving honourable long ago.’

Mrs. Parkes shuddered, for her husband's face wore an expression so truculent that it was like an illustration to his words.

'There's nothing for it, George, but patience,' she said soothingly.

'Patience. Yes, but perhaps there isn't time for patience,' exclaimed the game-keeper passionately. But the moment the words had passed his lips he repented of them. Whatever reason he might have for hurrying matters on, he felt that he must not confide them to the wife of his bosom. 'I mean, lass,' he added in gentler tones, 'that the young Squire's going to college may be the ruin of the whole affair. "Out of sight, out of mind," is a true proverb, and never truer than in the case of a boy's love. Now, are you sure you have done your best with Lucy?'

'I have written everything you told me to write, George,' answered she humbly.

'And did you say you wrote it of yourself—that I did not dictate it to you, with a horsewhip in my hand, eh?'

And his dark face fixed itself on hers with menacing significance.

‘Of course I said I wrote it of myself, George. If—if—Lucy didn’t believe it, that was not my fault.’

‘Yes, it was; if she had not known you to be such a puling milk-and-water sort of nature, she *would* have believed it. There’s some women as I have known who, if they had been in your place, would have got this matter settled off hand. But *you*——’

Words sufficiently indicative of his supreme contempt for Mrs. Parkes’ weakness of character here failed him; and he relieved his feelings by spitting in the fire.

‘I don’t know how that girl ever came to be a daughter of yours,’ he went on, in a low growl, almost as much canine as human; *she’s* got enough spirit in her—*bad* spirit—for a dozen women. Hang it, if I don’t sometimes think you must have played Willie Lindon false, and that Lucy never could have been his bairn, for he was a soft, foolish, feckless creature, just like yourself.’

‘Willie was always very kind to me,’ answered the poor woman, with a red spot on either cheek, which was the nearest

approach she dared to make to the expression of indignation. At the same time two tears coursed slowly down her pale cheeks.

Mr. Parkes watched them with contemptuous interest, as he would have looked on a race between two 'screws' which it was not worth his while to bet about.

'Ah! everybody was kind to you, of course, except your present husband. I wish Lindon had been a little kinder and stopped on in the world.'

With which benevolent aspiration he rose from his seat, and, taking up his gun, went about his professional duties.

Even there, however, he could not forget the subject of his trouble.

'As for Lucy,' he muttered as he strode along, 'I could shoot the girl as soon as look at her; indeed sooner, for I hate the sight of her disdainful face. What a chance that girl has had of benefiting herself and her family! Strike me blind, if I can tell what she means by such mad folly. Here's the young Squire ready to jump into her

arms, and she says, "No; let him stop a bit, and see whether he doesn't like somebody else better." *I* run risk enough, Heaven knows, but then I'm obliged to do it: but she is running her's without any reason for it: when there is every reason that tongue can frame why she shouldn't run it. And yet there was a time when she was wiser. She listened to me eagerly enough I could see (though she strove to hide it), when I told her how the banns matter could be managed. Yet, though she has snared her game, she won't so much as stoop to pick it up and put it in her bag. And now it's ten to one that the string won't hold, at all events not long enough for my purpose. Gar! I could wring her neck like a partridge's, and like the job.'



CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE 'SCREEN.'

I HAVE heard, from the lips of a sporting philosopher, the pursuit of pleasure compared with that of the fox, to join in which we trot along in high spirits, and take part in the run with great delight, but afterwards, when the fox has been killed *a great way from home*, we ride back through the gathering dusk, wearily and drearily enough. But the road to cover is very pleasant (in some cases even better than the rest of the proceedings, for the day may be a 'blank' one), and especially to those who are well mounted and have nothing but their sport to think about, as was Richard Talbot's case. To one in his position the Uni-

versity affords almost unalloyed delight (the inconveniences of 'chapel' and 'lectures' being so small that they are hardly worth mentioning); all faces are friendly to him, all hands stretched forth in welcome; and if dull care is really behind the horseman it is out of sight, and in that glorious noonday throws no shadow before him. Richard felt the poetry of existence without knowing it, and took the goods wherewith the gods provided him without any sense of obligation.

His undergraduate life did not run on the same broad gauge as that of his friend—who had a taste for light literature, and belonged to what has been irreverently termed the 'gin-punch and Shelley' set—but they often met, and when they did not, so great were the attractions of the place for both, that they did not greatly miss one another. They had a common junction, however, in the amateur actors' society, to which Talbot had been introduced by Greene, who was one of its leading members. He had an idea that he had the

'dramatic faculty,' and had offered the society more than one piece of his own composition—which they had declined to act. On the occasion of these rejections he was very unhappy for the day ; though on the morrow he forgot all about it. Richard, who experienced no rejections, was always in high spirits. It must be confessed that he thought less and less of his Lucy, daily ; and so far the chief object which his friends had had in view in sending him to Cambridge was attained. If that first term of his had been a long one, their success might perhaps have been complete. Or if, even at its conclusion, they had sent him to 'Paris, Vienna, or Munich,' he might have returned quite heart-whole. But when Alma Mater released him from his arduous studies, and he came back to Durnton Regis for the Christmas vacation, and without his friend, then, as might have been expected, he at once experienced a relapse. If home had been dull before, it was far duller now by contrast with the excitements of college ; while the chief

recreation within his reach was that of shooting, of which he partook, of course, in company with Mr. George Parkes, gamekeeper. Strangely enough, however, he had now become reticent on the subject of Lucy, and Richard was the first to speak about her.

‘Have you heard,’ inquired he, as they were standing together at the corner of a wood on their first day with the pheasants, ‘have you heard any news, George, from Ford’s Alley lately?’

‘Yes, I’ve heard a many things; but I don’t mean to talk about ’em. It seems, Master Richard, that you and I have agreed to differ upon that subject altogether, and therefore I think we’d better let it alone.’

And, with a grunt, the gamekeeper slowly moved away, like a man who bears a grievance. Nevertheless, at various times he allowed hints to escape him which were as fuel to the young gentleman’s amorous flame. Lucy, it appeared, was more beautiful than ever, and though she

sang divinely, was sought after for her beauty quite as much as her vocal gifts. She was true as steel no doubt, but girls were but girls, and were liable to have their heads turned by flattery and incense. In a couple of months or so, it was true, some communication might be allowed between her and her lover; but four months had already elapsed, and so prolonged a silence was, in the midst too of so much temptation, a great trial to a girl's fidelity. Moreover, even when the six months were over, there was no guarantee of any sort that she would be allowed to meet him; in fact it was certain that new obstacles would be interposed. Mr. Parkes, for his part, had no patience to speak of it, though Master Richard seemed fortunately endowed with a superabundance of that virtue. When he, Mr. Parkes, was a young fellow, he had some spirit in him—but there, he had said his say long ago, and there was no use in chatter.

It was very creditable to Mr. Parkes' self-control that he discussed the matter in

this diplomatic and cynical style, for the reasons already hinted at, that had been so pressing upon him with respect to the union of the young couple, were becoming more importunate than ever.

It was arranged between the gamekeeper and the young Squire that on the first favourable night they should have 'a shot at the ducks,' as the former expressed it, or, in other words, shoot wild-fowl on the Durn. The opportunity soon afterwards arrived, on an evening which promised a clear moonlight with a gentle breeze; and at the appointed hour Richard set out for the little quay, where he was to meet Mr. Parkes with his punt. The time had been fixed by the latter, as being propitious for the purpose—when the birds should be, as he termed it, 'on their last legs,' that is, when the incoming tide should be flowing over the ooze, except here and there, where on spots a little elevated the birds were delaying till the water should compel them to take wing; and Richard, as usual when pleasure was in prospect, was before his time.

Nevertheless, no one was stirring in the village as he came through it at the double, and well wrapped up, for the wind was high and very cold ; nor on the little jetty was any one to be seen, except the man who was expecting him.

‘ I am glad you are early, Master Richard,’ said George, with whom the force of habit was so strong that he still addressed his companion by that boyish title, though he had so strong an interest in persuading him that he was of mature years. ‘ It is a bitter night, and one might just as well have something to keep the cold out before we start.’

He led the way to a small shed, which stood at the end of the jetty, and which afforded at least shelter from the wind, which was driving towards the sea, and pulled out a case-bottle from his top-coat. ‘ There, take a nip of that.’

Richard did so, nothing loth, for, in spite of the pace at which he had come, his teeth chattered like castanets.

‘ That’s good brandy,’ said he ; ‘ where did you get it ?’

‘Ask no questions, and you’ll hear no lies, Master Richard,’ answered the other, grimly. ‘One should never look a gift cask in the bung-hole. Take one more drop—just one. Now listen to me; I’ve got something to tell you.’

‘About Lucy?’ said Richard quickly.

‘Yes, about Lucy. She’s sick and tired of waiting for you, and she’s written to say so.’

‘Who to?’ cried Richard, regardless of grammar.

‘To *you*.’

‘To me? I don’t believe it—that is, where is the letter?’

‘You don’t believe it? You will, though, if seeing’s believing, for here it is. And yet it ain’t a letter, neither; it’s just a scrap. Only a few words, but such words! And yet I don’t know whether I ought to show them to you, for fear you should do something rash.’

‘No, no; I won’t do that. You are the last man to complain of my want of prudence.’

‘Yes, but this is so great a temptation. To think that, if you cared to do it, you might see her this very night, clasp her in your arms, and not part from her until you were married, and then never part. I know that when I was a young fellow, had such a chance presented itself, I should have jumped at it; and I fear that even you, Master Richard, though you seem so cold-blooded——’

‘Let me see it,’ put in Richard huskily—
‘let me see her letter;’ and he held out his trembling hand.

‘Well, I’ve got it somewheres about me, I know. Here, take the lantern; hold it steady, or I shall never find it, for it is, as I told you, but a scrap.’

Here he began to fumble in his pockets while Richard watched him as a hungry dog watches his master suck a bone.

The lantern was not of the kind commonly used by the gamekeeper class, but a very neat ‘dark’ one, and when the shield was slipped it threw a strong light upon any object; but in poor Richard’s shaking

hands the light wandered about like a will-o'-the-wisp, nor could he fix it upon the scrap of paper, which Mr. Parkes now held before him.

‘Give *me* the lantern, Master Richard,’ said that gentleman, in a tone in which contempt and conventional respect were strangely mingled, ‘and I’ll hold the paper for you.’

It was a picture worthy of a good daughtsman to see the tall hairy giant thus engaged, and peering above the lantern at his young friend with a fierce, anxious look; while Richard, with pale face and eager eyes, perused the writing. It was Lucy’s without doubt, but it consisted only of a line or two, without address.

‘I shall be at Swanborough, at the Crown, to-morrow afternoon. Pray be there to meet me.

‘Yours ever lovingly,

‘LUCY LINDON.

‘Monday.’

The boy’s face flushed crimson.

‘She wrote on Monday,’ he said; ‘then she is there now?’

The gamekeeper nodded. ‘Of course she is—waiting for you.’

‘But how did you come by this? Why is it not addressed to me?’

‘Because of your ridiculous scruples—either hers or yours—about writing to one another. She promised not to write to you, did she not? So she enclosed this slip in a note to me. She says to me: “I find I have overrated my strength; I cannot live without dear Richard”—or words to that effect. She wants you to join her at Swanborough, and go to London. She has secured lodgings for you in the city, while she will remain at Ford’s Alley till the banns can be published; and then you will be married hard and fast. As for the money that will be necessary, I’ve got it in my pocket, Master Richard, and it is very much at your service. You can pay me any day.’

And he produced a canvas bag of considerable size, and chinked the gold within it.

Richard took it mechanically ; thanks to the brandy and the excitement of his feelings he scarcely knew what he was about.

‘I shall start at once,’ said he quickly ; ‘you must lend me your horse and trap.’

‘Not I,’ said Mr. Parkes, with decision. ‘I have got myself to look to as well as you, Master Richard. You must start from your own stable upon this errand, and after our night’s work is done. There must seem to be no collusion between us. That is why I have kept Lucy’s note till now ; I felt that you might do something rash, else. As long as you are in time for the night mail from Swanborough, it will be all right. Lucy will go by that train.’

The gamekeeper spoke with the quiet calm of a master of the situation ; it would have been evident to any disinterested listener that the suggested plan had been fixed upon beforehand, and not without calculation. The deep but clear voice, the steady gaze that looked straight into Richard’s eyes, not indeed with the frankness of truth, but with a hardihood that

defied suspicion, all spoke of premeditation. His companion, however, saw nothing of this. Trembling with passion and excitement, and flushed with the unaccustomed and potent liquor, he only beheld in Mr. Parkes a clearsighted and sagacious adviser, and felt the need of his assistance. He kept repeating to himself, 'I shall be at Swanborough to-morrow ; pray be there to meet me,' as though it were some magic charm, and indeed in his case it had all the reputed virtues of a love philter.

The scrap of paper on which the words were written he had taken from the other's hand, though not altogether with his goodwill, and placed in his breast-pocket, next his heart. He had no more chance of resisting this man's will than clay would have in a contention with iron ; but he was not conscious that he was obeying his will.

'Come, Master Richard, we are losing time ; let's get into the punt ; and don't you meddle with the guns till the time comes, for this chill breeze makes the hand shake.' These weapons were in the bottom

of the boat, which was a flat-bottomed one, but by no means large. When Richard took his seat in it, and his companion the oars, the latter almost touched him with his hands when he came forward for the stroke. In spite, therefore, of the force of the wind, they could converse together without raising their voices so as to alarm their game. The ripple of the waves darkened the dull stream, and the oozes on both sides looked almost inky black, but the shallows shone in the moonlight with a silvery brightness, and on that 'white water,' as it is termed, the birds would presently stand out in strong relief.'

'Have your eyes about you, Master Richard; you are not keeping a good look, out.'

'I am not thinking of the birds, George. I care nothing about shooting to-night.'

'Ah, but you should. Life is short, and every moment of it should be enjoyed when we can. Besides, it will make the time pass quickly that must elapse before you see your Lucy. You must be with me

for a couple of hours. Then you will go home with me, so that Annie may see us part company ; and after that I don't know what becomes of you. You will take your mare, I suppose ; she is the quickest on her legs.'

Richard nodded ; he had already made up his mind to take the mare.

' Pray be there to meet me,' the note had said.' ' Yes, he would be there, though late. His honour, his word, his filial resolutions—were all scattered to the winds ; the sudden temptation, as Mr. Parkes had foreseen, had quite over-mastered him.

' Hark, Master Richard, hark !'

On the wings of the breeze was borne to them that soft and confused noise, sometimes compared with distant rain, which is the whistling or ' charming ' of the wid-geon. The banks on both sides were growing very low, but straight in front of them, and in the centre of the river was a huge shining something—which was an isolated mud-bank ; and on this—their last foothold—the birds were standing.

‘There they are, I’ll bet a crown,’ said George, in a hoarse whisper; ‘we must keep away till the tide is a little higher; it is rising very fast though the wind is dead against. Here just take the oars while I land at yonder screen, and take a look up the river.’

The ‘screen’ was a low sea-wall or break-water, over which the tide ran several feet at its highest, but which still stood out above the inky flood. There was firm ground beneath it, and, as George very well knew, the water would not yet reach to his knees, which were amply protected by wading boots. His purpose was, therefore, to conceal himself behind this object, and from thence to make his observations.

‘You have not got your mud-pattens on,’ observed Richard. This was a precaution which, with one other, ‘never let both persons leave the punt together,’ had been instilled into him from the first time he had ever gone duck-shooting, by the gamekeeper himself.

‘Pattens are of no use here, Master

Richard; the mud is fifty feet away. Steady while I get out—damnation!

His foot, as he leaped out, had struck the oar next the screen, and forced it out of the rollock. The next instant the boat was whirling round and round towards the sea, past all Richard's power of guidance; while his companion was left clinging to the screen, with the water rising round him three inches to the minute. With the usual carelessness of his class, the gamekeeper, though so frequently on the river, had never learnt to swim. He used to grimly say that those who were born for another fate had no need to do so; but had he been ever so good a swimmer, to escape over the mudbanks, even should he reach them, would have been hopeless without his patens. This horrible reflection now monopolised Richard's mind, even to the exclusion of his own safety, about which he might well have been apprehensive. The boat, caught broadside by the wind, which had grown higher than ever, was being slowly driven seawards against the tide,

and the black curling waves had already forced their way into it. There was a hole at the stern for propelling the boat upon the screw system, and Richard strove to put his remaining oar to that use, but his inexperienced hands could get no way on her. And all the time was ringing in his ears a passionate cry, not so much of fear as of anguish, from his late companion, 'Boat, boat! help, help!' which mingled with the wind itself, and seemed to give it voice.

Breathless and perspiring, though the cold of the night air was intense, the boy battled on with furious but ill-directed efforts; and yet to his ear reproaches seemed to mix with these cries for succour. To Parkes, no doubt, had their situations been reversed, it would have been possible, though difficult, to force the punt in the desired direction. 'Help! boat, back, back! don't desert me, Master Richard! I drown, I drown!' The water was at the man's knees when he left the boat; it must now be at his thighs—and now at his middle. He would get on the

wall, no doubt ; but that would only prolong his agonies, if assistance should not come. And whence was it to come ?

The punt had now drifted nearly to the village, and, though not a light was to be seen, Richard gave forth shriek after shriek for aid. There was no answer, save the shrill cry of the seagull, and the roar of the wind still bearing on its icy wings the victim's passionate appeal. All thought of Lucy had been utterly banished from Richard's mind, when suddenly there sprang up within him the recollection of that night when, boy and girl together, he and Lucy had crossed the Durn to see the new light in that very Pharos which now stood up, dark and silent, like a monument of death, upon the eastern bank. Boy and girl they had been then, innocent playfellows ; but now some contrasting thought was in his mind which made the remembrance bitter. Was it possible that that perishing man yonder had plotted the girl's ruin, and was he (Richard) himself to have been the instrument of it ? Was not remorse as well

as despair in those terrible cries, which would surely still ring in his ears so long as he had life to hear a sound? To his acute but morbid senses it indeed seemed so. Then another flash of memory shot into his mind: the little creek was somewhere on his left, where he and Lucy had found safety; not that he was looking for safety now, albeit his situation was most perilous, but for the means of invoking aid for another. By this time it was clear that he could never land on the river-bank next the village, from which, although the wind blew but aslant, such was its power that he never approached that side nearer than mid-stream. There seemed, indeed, to be something demoniacal in this wind, laden with its hideous sounds, and driving him back from his merciful purpose against the force of the tide; and yet, which added to its horror, he knew that, should it drop, the waters would pour in like a deluge and drown their victim out of hand.

The only hope was now to get the punt into the little haven of which we have

spoken, whereby the lighthouse might be reached and help obtained from its keepers. To this end, therefore, Richard strained every nerve.

The waves were higher near the mouth of the river, but the forces of wind and tide were nearly equalised, so that he could direct his canoe with a little more accuracy than heretofore ; but the creek was small, and the punt, by reason of its build, unwieldy, and exposed to the action both of wind and wave : when it was seized by the swirling eddies, it was whirled about in them like a straw ; but where the stream ran straight, he could turn its head, like a runaway horse on which the desperate rider pulls a single rein in hopes to pull him round. As it was, Richard missed the creek ; but as he was hurried by the jutting rock that formed it, he sprang out, and, finding foothold, reached the land, while his frail bark whirled on into the wintry sea without a tenant.



CHAPTER XIV.

WIDOWED.

ON touching ground new vigour revived in Richard ; to find himself master of his own movements was in itself, after all that vain toiling against the powers of wind and wave, an exhilarating fact ; and it was with something more of hope than he had yet ventured to entertain that he set off at speed for the lighthouse. He had never visited it since that night—which now seemed part of another lifetime—when Lucy and he had sought admittance there ; but it was quite unchanged. Neither storm nor spray had dulled its harsh grey features ; and the same man that had opened the narrow door to them, now

answered his hasty summons, and with an equally astonished air.

‘Master Richard—*again?*’

‘Yes. Get out your boat: lose not a moment.’ (They were already running down to the spot where it was lying.)

‘George Parkes is on the screen—the first from here—and when I left him the tide was above his knees.’

‘How long ago? Tell me all while I am pulling for his life. I have no breath to lose. Jump in.’

In less time than would have seemed possible to a landsman, the lighthouse wherry was on its way. The wind had slightly fallen, and the tide, now almost at full flood, materially assisted their progress.

‘George got out to have a look at some birds over the sea-wall, and in doing so kicked an oar away: then I was powerless to help him.’

The light-keeper nodded; he quite understood that; and he had his own views of Richard himself having reached land; he thought the fact next kin to a miracle.

‘We parted, as far as I can judge—but I may be quite wrong, it seems an age—about half an hour ago.’

The light-keeper shook his head, and bent to his work. Richard read in his face that they were too late.

‘Look about you for him in the water,’ gasped the other presently.

Aghast with horror the boy looked around him right and left; nothing was to be seen but the dark tide, with here and there a white-tipped wave. The banks were covered, the last shoals had been swallowed up.

‘I can see nothing,’ answered he. ‘I cannot even see the screen, though we should surely be within sight of it by this time.’

‘It is beneath us now,’ answered the other, hoarsely. He had ceased rowing, and was keeping the wherry as stationary as was possible, with her head to the wind. Richard did not recognise the spot; the screen was nowhere to be seen; the mud island beyond had sunk; the birds had

long been on the wing. But he knew the man could not be mistaken.

‘My God, where is he?’

‘Farther up; for the tide has not yet turned. He will be down here presently, poor fellow.’

‘What do you mean? Dead, drowned?’

‘Aye, if he had a hundred lives to lose. What is this?’

Richard turned sick with horror, expecting to see the corpse of his late companion on the flood. It was, however, a comparatively small object, which, as it was whirled about close to his oar, the light-keeper dexterously seized and laid in the boat. It was the yellow waterproof cap, with a fall behind, that Parkes was accustomed to wear upon the river.

‘You see I was right,’ observed the man, ‘this is the eddy above the wall. If he had been a swimmer we might have picked him up. Poor George!’

They waited for nearly an hour, scanning the water narrowly on all sides; the cold was intense, and in spite of their excite-

ment they felt it bitterly. If it had not been for the brandy he had swallowed, the boy would have fared ill, indeed.

‘We are being frozen to death,’ said the light-keeper presently. ‘It is no use for us to stop longer.’

‘Nay, we cannot leave him here,’ returned the boy, shuddering as much with awe as cold.

‘He is not here, Master Richard. He is nigh the bar by this time. We shall find him at low tide to-morrow by the Durn rocks.’

(He spoke truth, for so indeed it happened, and Richard felt that it must be so.)

‘I will put you ashore at the jetty; perhaps you will go to the spinney cottage yourself, Master Richard. You know his people better than I.’

‘I dare not,’ said Richard. He felt utterly unequal to the task of meeting George’s widow alone. ‘But I will go, if you will go with me.’

They started therefore together, in silence, each seeking within himself for some-

thing to say in the way of comfort, and in vain.

From the little leafless lane the cottage could be seen at some distance, and to their surprise they noticed lights in more than one window. It was not Mrs. Parkes' practice to sit up for her husband—who, indeed, was sometimes away all night on duty in the preserves, and yet now not only was there a light in her bedroom window, but also in that below stairs. As they neared the porch two men sprang out upon them, and seized the light-keeper, and before he could recover from his surprise, had slipped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

'George Parkes, I arrest you in the Queen's name,' cried one, 'for burglary. Whatever you may say, I warn you, will be used at your trial——'

'George, George,' interposed an agonised voice from the upper window. 'Speak to me, husband, for God's sake, and tell me that you are innocent.'

'Go away with them into the lane and

wait there,' whispered Richard to his companion. And the two men moved off with him willingly enough, for they had expected a most vehement resistance. The next moment Richard found himself face to face with his foster-mother.

'Oh, Master Richard, darling, tell me it is not true about dear George. He has done wrong a many times, but never, never committed a crime like this. Oh, ask them to let him go, or it will kill me.'

'Calm yourself, dear Annie,' said Richard gravely; 'they will not do your husband any harm.' This was true at least, and the confidence of his tone seemed to give the poor woman comfort.

'I know you will stand by him whatever happens,' sobbed she imploringly. 'And I don't think what they have told me *could* have happened. Is it likely—is it possible—that my George should have committed such a crime; and in such a place?'

'What place, what crime, Annie?'

'They say that he broke into the Manor House—your friend Mr. Pole's own house

—last night, when he was in your father's woods, I know, about his duties till after daylight.'

In an instant it flashed on Richard's mind that the excellent brandy of which he had partaken on the jetty must have come from Mr. Pole's own cellars. (It was, in fact, from his own particular 'sixty year old' bin.) But his face only showed gentleness and compassion.

'Whatever has happened, Annie, we will do our best for you,' he said.

'Then go after him now, and bring him back. I have thought ill of him at times, but all that is over now. What should I, *should* I do, if he never should come back again! Go, go——,' and she pushed him with all her feeble strength.

'Promise me to stay in-doors, and keep as calm as you can, Annie. I cannot bring him back again, indeed; but I will do my best for you,' reiterated Richard.

It was a relief to him to get away under any pretence, and he had a plan by this time in his mind.

In the lane he found the two policemen and their charge, who had already half convinced them of their mistake as to his identity.

Richard, in a few words, explained to them how matters stood.

‘It is better so for him, master, bad as it seems,’ said one of them, ‘for he would otherwise have been “a lifer.”’

Richard understood him at once.

‘Did he use violence then?’

‘I believe you. One of Mr. Pole’s footmen is done for, I understand; though he had sense enough come back to him this afternoon to swear to his man.’

‘You two belong to Masham, I suppose?’ said Richard. ‘Here is a sovereign apiece for you’ (he pulled out poor George’s bag), ‘and don’t say anything of what has occurred to our Durnton folk.’

It was to Richard’s credit that up to the moment of George Parkes quitting the boat in that fatal manner not one thought of self, nor of his own concerns, intruded itself upon his mind; and even now, when

the worst was over, or at least known, and the reflection of how the consequences of the dead man's crime must need affect his relations with Lucy, forced itself upon him, he still put the interest of the dead man—or rather of his belongings—before his own. What he was about to do was to go to the Rector and tell him all, and then send him down to the spinney to administer what comfort might be possible to poor Annie.

This was a step obviously injurious to himself: for he would have to acknowledge, tacitly or otherwise, his own belief in George's guilt, and what an opportunity would this afford Mr. Freeman to improve the occasion as respected Lucy! It would certainly have been better for him to let matters take their course, and give himself at least the chance of George's proving innocent; nor did it lie within his natural duties to fetch a clergyman to Annie. Nevertheless, since it seemed to him that this was the best thing to be done for her, he did it.

For many a year, that night stood out in

Richard's memory as a thing apart, a fragment of his life, yet of altogether a different substance to the rest of it; every incident of it marked as sharply as were the objects by the wayside as he ran upon his present errand along the moonlit road. It was the first time (for one thing) that he had been brought face to face with death; and wan, pale-sheeted death seemed to people the white fields around him. If his mission had not been one of urgency as well as duty, he might even have felt childish fear; but as it was, he was only awed and softened.

To his imperious summons at the Rectory door there was for some time no reply; but presently the window above it opened, and Mr. Freeman's voice inquired his name and errand.

'It is I, Richard Talbot; poor George Parkes has been drowned in the Durn.'

'The Lord have mercy upon his soul,' ejaculated the Rector fervently, but with the desperation that suppliants use who have but faintest hopes. 'Poor wretch;

poor man—I will come down to you in a moment.'

Then a smothered voice was heard in expostulation: 'Madness, with your sore throat; Giles—in such a night—what good can you possibly do if the man is dead?'

Again the Rector appeared at the window, this time with a stocking coiled about his neck.

'If I can be of any service, Richard, of course I'll come, but——'

'I think you can, sir. Something else has happened; the police have been down to the cottage after George—I am afraid there has been some bad business up at Masham Manor. And poor Annie, who does not even know she is a widow, is sadly in need of comfort.'

'Poor soul, poor soul! get away from the window, Giles,' cried a sharp feminine voice. 'It's *me*, Richard'—Richard was not quite certain who 'me' was at the moment, though reflection would of course have convinced him that it could be no other than Mrs. Freeman (a nightcap

with a large border does however greatly tend to confuse identity). ‘This is *my* affair, my dear boy ; it is woman’s work to comfort women, and besides Giles has such a bad throat. I will be down in a moment.’

‘You must not be hard upon Annie,’ murmured Richard, half to himself, his fear of the Rector’s wife and his tenderness for his foster-mother contending within him. Through the sharp clear air, the muffled words found their way to the ear to which they were addressed.

‘Hard, dear boy ? God forbid ! I shall only think of her as a widow in her affliction, and do what I can to help her bear it.’

The sincerity of Mrs. Freeman’s speech was beyond dispute.

It seemed, indeed, that there was no end to Richard’s experiences on this eventful night. He had met Death, and Crime, and Desolation, and Pity, each as unlooked for as the rest, all face to face for the first time ; and in acknowledging that there was much genuine good about this woman whom he had heretofore looked upon as

meddling, prejudiced, and sycophantic, he derived an indefinable pleasure, which was also a comfort. And the poor boy needed comfort.

Rawdon, the butler, who was sitting up for him, was startled out of his sleepiness by the pale and careworn face of his young master.

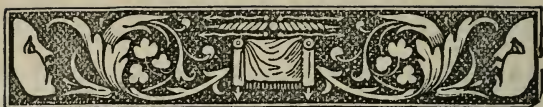
‘Is anything amiss, Master Richard?’

‘Yes; there has been a sad accident on the river. Poor George Parkes is drowned. Don’t let my father know of it until the morning.’ Then he ran upstairs to bed, but not to sleep. Reflections respecting his own position, his own interests (or what he thought to be so) now began to crowd upon his mind. If Parkes had committed the crime imputed to him, the obstacles to his marriage with Lucy would be great indeed; so great that if it had not been for those few lines in her handwriting which had just come into his possession he would have deemed them insurmountable. If all this had happened yesterday, for example, he would have taken it for granted, know-

ing Lucy's independence of spirit, that she would have released him from his engagement—nay, have cancelled it herself; would have resolutely refused to permit him to ally himself with shame and crime; but now when, as poor George had said, she had 'grown sick and tired of waiting for him'—that is, of longing for him—and had written, 'I shall be at Swanborough to-morrow afternoon; pray be there to meet me,' it was different. She might still hold him bound, and he would never deny her right to do so. He did not know, he could not guess—how could he?—that that sentence was not written for his eyes at all, but had been addressed by Lucy to her mother. She had reasons for wishing to see her, and being forbidden to come to Durnton, had appointed Swanborough as their meeting-place: and her step-father had intercepted her letter, and would have used that extract from it for his own purposes. He knew that matters had come to a crisis with him, and that Richard's protection would be at once necessary to his

liberty, and even to save his neck. If he could only precipitate matters between the young Squire and Lucy this might be done, and in no other way. If once he could have got Richard to go to Swanborough and meet the girl, he trusted to passion to do the rest. Explanations, misapprehensions, would have vanished, he knew, in her sweet presence. That he was thereby putting the girl's honour—the honour of his own wife's daughter—in extreme peril, did not enter into his calculations, or if it did was set down as so much to his own advantage.

And he was now lying dead and drowned under the Durn rocks, and his soul had gone to its account to Him who gave it.



CHAPTER XV.

LUCY GIVES UP HER LOVE.

GEORGE PARKES was a common type of mankind enough, and not so utterly worthless as circumstances made him to appear. He was, after all, as we have said, only a despot in the wrong place; but being there, it was he himself who suffered instead of the nation he ought (if nature had given him his rights) to have ruled. As it was, his subject (for he had but one) loyally bewailed his fate. Mrs. Freeman used to say that during that sad night's companionship with poor Annie (for she remained with her till dawn), she found it very difficult to listen to her eulogies upon her dead husband, for 'she had really no patience with such rub-

bish ;' yet somehow or other she found patience.

No doubt, too, she was softened towards the poor woman from hearing (as she did) from her own lips that the engagement between the young Squire and Lucy had been without her approval.

But really there was something to be said for George. He was a born poacher—as all sportsmen are ; only some have lands of their own and some have not—yet he was always faithful to his employer.

It was not *his* game that he stole and sold, but only that of the neighbours. For years, as it came out, he had been in league with men who supplied to the London poulterers the produce of all the preserves in the vicinity, including those of his enemy, Mr. Pole. And in an evil hour he had made alliance with a still more predatory band, and 'cracked' the Manor House at Masham. He had also, as I have said, cracked the skull of a footman who had had the imprudence to intervene between

George and the tax-cart in which he had placed his plunder, but who got his wits back sufficiently to swear to his antagonist's identity.

All this came out at the inquest on George's body, at which, of course, Richard was the chief witness. The conventional homage therefore which the living pay to the dead, wherever it is possible, was denied to George Parkes: his widow alone mourned him; and even with her sorrow was doubtless mingled a sense of enfranchisement.

As to Lucy, she detested her step-father dead even more than she had done when he was alive. His last act had been her ruin. Wholly unconscious of the deception he had striven to practise upon Richard, she knew not how near the latter had been to throwing himself into her arms at Swanborough, or how now he watched and waited for some sign of that impatience to be his which he believed her to have already manifested. She thought that he must feel the ignominy of her step-father's con-

duct in the same light as she did herself, as a disgrace too terrible to be surmounted, and which had, as it were, overflowed and contaminated all connected with him.

When her mother came up to town (which she did at once on the invitation of Aunt Susan), she felt that all links between Durnton and Ford's Alley were practically severed, and that a few details only, by way of supplement, were left for her in order to make the separation complete.

She was misjudged, of course, by almost everybody ; very few—none indeed, perhaps, save Richard himself—gave her credit for such generous feelings, and none—not even Richard—could estimate the agony it cost her to obey the dictates of her conscience. It was the opinion of all Richard's friends that, in spite of all that had 'so providentially' happened to extricate the young man from his entanglement, that he was not yet out of the net, and that Lucy would make some desperate effort to retain his allegiance. Even Aunt Susan was not sure what course her niece in-

tended to pursue, while Mrs. Parkes was in total ignorance of her intentions. There had been little confidence between mother and daughter at any time, and of late years, thanks to the former's ill-judged second marriage, absolutely none ; she only knew that her Lucy was too masterful to be dictated to by anybody, and would take her own way. The girl never spoke, either to her mother or her aunt, of her present feelings ; but about a week after her step father had been buried she told Susan that she wished to have a few words with Miss Talbot. And of course this opportunity was given to her.

These two women, more different in faith and feeling, in character and conduct, than even in their social position, had a certain respect for one another, though that too was, in each case, of a widely different kind. Edith, always grave, and attired in the grey uniform of her sisterhood, would have seemed to the casual observer more like a mourner than Lucy, who had positively declined to wear even the outward

signs of regret for her late step-father ; but one who looked beneath the surface would have seen in the latter's face a woe that was almost greater than she could bear. She did indeed bear it bravely, but (as in the case of other dumb creatures who are overladen) the strain was felt for years.

'Would you mind coming into my own room, Miss Talbot ?' said Lucy, when Sister Edith had been ushered into the upper parlour. 'Perhaps aunt or mother might come in here, and——'

'By all means let us be alone,' put in the other eagerly ; she felt this wish for privacy augured well for Richard, and, besides, was very willing to humour the poor girl in any case.

She had been in Lucy's bedroom, as we know, before, and she noticed that it had undergone a change. It had been always scrupulously neat and clean, but it now contained various articles of luxury which it had lacked before. The table was furnished with a swing-looking-glass, and bore all the necessaries for a rather elaborate

toilet ; a comfortable *fauteuil* had replaced the cane-bottomed chair that had stood in front of this table ; and on the low walls were hung several pictures, landscape chromos in expensive frames. But for these circumstances the visitor would not, perhaps, have remarked Lucy's dress (for Sister Edith was not as other women in that respect), but she now took note that it was both of richer material and in far better taste than it had wont to be. These facts did not impress her favourably, though perhaps she would have been puzzled to say why it was so.

Lucy did not offer her visitor a chair, but stood before her, very stiff and straight, as she thus addressed her :

‘Miss Talbot, you have gained your point, though you would not have done so had it not been for my step-father's misconduct. Heaven, as you may term it—hell, as it seems to *me*—has decided against me in this matter.’

Edith would have spoken, but Lucy held up her hand for silence. ‘If you have any

pity in your woman's heart, do not talk to me about it; I want neither thanks nor praise (as I deserve none) for what I am about to do.'

She spoke mechanically, as though she had got her words by heart, and very slowly.

'I mean to give Richard up rather than soil his name by coupling it with mine. I put my love under foot—I wish I could kill it, but alas! it lives, it lives—for his dear sake. Henceforward he is free.' Her voice had suddenly grown very low. 'Bear with me, madam; this is a sharp trial, and I feel it bitterly.'

There was a short pause ere she went on again, with an attempt at steadiness very pitiful to listen to.

'If the time had elapsed during which I promised not to write to him, I would do so; but it is better as it is. You will write instead, and he will believe you. Tell him—tell him——'

The unutterable wretchedness of the poor girl's face and her trembling tones touched Sister Edith's heart, and she put

forth her hand caressingly. But Lucy drew back. 'No, no,' she said, 'do not soften me ; I cannot bear it. I say, do you write to him and tell him, from me, that all between us two is over. You need not say that this has come to pass because I love him far too dearly to do him any harm—he will know that, I think ; if not, it is better not to say it. And he must not write to me, nor come to me,' she added, with sudden vehemence ; 'mind that, for then I could not answer for myself.'

Sister Edith inclined her head ; she could not trust herself to speak, lest she should sob outright.

'Well, there is nothing more but this.' She took up a little packet that lay upon the bed, and opened it. 'This is the locket, with his dear picture, that he gave to me. I cannot wear it any more, nor look upon it. Tell him so, but do not tell him why. And these—they are valueless to every eye but mine, yet take them—a pincushion, a thimble, and the like, he gave to me when we were boy and girl together.'

‘Keep *them*, dear Lucy,’ said Sister Edith softly. ‘Why not? I will send the locket back, but keep the others.’

‘Do you think I might?’ said Lucy simply.

‘Surely, surely; what harm can there be in keeping memorials of such a far back time?’

She held them out, and the girl clutched at them as misers clutch at gold, and put them into her bosom. ‘Thanks, thanks,’ she murmured. Then, after a long pause, ‘You have been kind to me, Miss Talbot, all along, and meant me well, even when you seemed unkind. We part good friends, I trust?’

‘Good friends and something more, dear Lucy, though you forbid me to say how highly I think of you. But why should we part?’

‘Because it would pain me to meet you,’ said Lucy quietly. ‘I must see no one who can remind me of—of Richard.’

‘For a time it may be so, Lucy. But at all events you must allow me to be of

service to you. It will be no longer "kindness," as you term it, on my part; you have now a claim upon me that I can never ignore or forget.'

'I am obliged to you,' said Lucy coldly; 'but henceforward I can receive nothing from your hand—no, not though it were to save me from starvation. I never sought advantage from your nephew's love, and I will accept nothing as compensation for the loss of it.'

'That is ungenerous, Lucy, and unlike yourself. You and yours will now need help——'

'That is my affair,' interrupted the girl haughtily. 'I can help myself and my mother too.'

'May I ask how, Lucy?' and Sister Edith's eyes wandered, not without apprehension, to the swing-glass and the pictures.

'I am going on the stage.'

'I trust not—I hope not,' said Edith hurriedly. 'You do not know—setting aside the higher question, Is it right?—the

hardships, and what is worse, the temptations, of such a calling.'

'I think I do,' said Lucy, a smile of something like contempt pouting her pretty lips; 'at all events,' the smile seemed to say, 'I know a deal more about them than *you* do.' Then her face softened as she added 'You see, Miss Edith, it is impossible that I can allow my aunt to bear this double burthen of myself and my mother: and though singing in the choir at St. Ethelburga is very well, it is not well paid.'

'But it shall be so; I will speak to the Rector,' said Edith eagerly.

'That means you will increase my salary yourself,' answered Lucy, smiling. 'No, Miss Edith, I again repeat that I am conscious of your goodness towards me. For all you have done for me I thank you kindly, and for all you would have done; but your help is no longer possible.' And she held out her hand, not without a certain dignity.

Sister Edith took it, clasped it tenderly,

and left her with a sigh instead of farewell. Their roads in life were henceforward fated to diverge more and more from one another ; but their hearts retained always something in common, besides the love of a common object.

In the room below, the crippled little ones were still sitting at feast, as Sister Edith had left them, with Susan and the widow waiting upon them. Mrs. Parkes, though by nature weak, was too gentle and unselfish not to feel some comfort in such kindly ministrations. Edith beckoned Susan into an adjoining room.

‘How is it, Miss Edith—has she not given him up?’ asked the good woman, reading sorrow in her companion’s eyes.

‘She has done all that you expected of her and more, Susan : she has behaved admirably—nobly—as respects Richard. It is only to herself that she is unkind.’

‘To herself?’

‘Yes. She will no longer accept help of me, neither for herself nor for her mother.’

‘I am sorry she is so proud.’

‘It is not that—to do her justice : help from me appears to her in the light of a compensation for having given Richard up. Nor will she permit *you* to maintain her and Annie. She has announced her fixed intention to go upon the stage.’

‘Never,’ cried Susan vehemently, ‘never. The stage is no place for such as she. I will work my fingers to the bone first.’

‘She has too much independence of spirit, I fear, for you to overcome her resolve.’

‘Independence, Miss Edith ? Who have I to work for, save for her ? She is all the same as though she was kith and kin to me.’

‘Still, I do not blame her, Susan, for resolving not to be a burthen to you. If you were in a better position as to the world’s goods, then perhaps she would have no such scruples——’

‘You do think that ?’ put in Susan eagerly.

‘Why, yes, in that case I cannot imagine her having any objection to receiving as-

sistance from your hands, and if I could only manage to put money in your pocket without her knowing it——'

'It is better to be straightforward, and besides the girl is as sharp as a needle,' put in Susan naively.

'But to let her go upon the stage,' said Edith, 'being so young and beautiful, and as you have hinted, so open to admiration, would be——'

'Ruin,' interrupted Susan with a groan. 'It is not to be thought of. I believe, however, that I have a plan to save her.'

'What is it?'

'I shall know to-night: I will tell you to-morrow. I think if I set about it at once my scheme will answer.'

'May God bless it and you,' cried Edith fervently.

As if in answer to her prayer there arose a harmony of little angels: the children were singing their grace.



CHAPTER XVI.

THE SUBSTITUTE.

THERE are some persons in the world, though very few it must be allowed, who are living protests against the doctrine of the Divines concerning original sin. They are generally of the female gender, and Susan Parkes was one of them. Diminutive almost to dwarfishness, and disfigured, as we have said, by tufts and knots of hair on her bewrinkled face, she might have been excused, if any could be, for looking on life with jaundiced eyes. For her, was neither lover nor husband possible ; and from the world at large she had received, at best, but pity ; at worst (and this was far more common), contemptuous ridicule.

To many persons in her position the youth and beauty of others of her own sex would have aroused no tender thoughts. As it was, those gifts, though denied to herself, begot no envy in her, but only a desire to keep them spotless for those who possessed them. She was, it is true, as respected those little ones in ministering to whom she passed her days, but the almoner of another ; but her duties towards them were performed with such heart-felt good will that they were sublimed and became virtues. The principles on which Sister Edith acted were almost unknown to Susan, and certainly not understood. She had no learning, save what her Bible taught her, and even that suggested little of dogma. Her piety was of the most crude and simple sort ; it had no colours, but then—to use a vulgar, but very expressive phrase—it ‘washed.’

In the graces of life poor Susan had never participated : friendship, in its ordinary sense, was as unknown to her as love itself. Even in the ties of blood she had

been unfortunate, for George Parkes had been her only brother, and the honesty of her heart was such that she could not idealise him as some natures might have contrived to do, or represent him to herself in any other light than that in which he really stood. She was quite aware, in short, that he was a ruffian. This knowledge had been fatal to any intimacy between them, and George had studiously kept Lucy away from Ford's Alley, lest she should have her eyes opened to his true character ; a superfluous precaution, as it happened ; first, because she had keen sight of her own ; and secondly, because Susan would have been the last to speak to Lucy of her mother's husband. However, so it had been, and the present had been the first time which the girl had ever passed beneath Aunt Susan's roof.

She had been there, however, now, for months, and the good creature's heart had warmed towards Lucy, as though she had been her sister's child ; I do not say as if she had been her own, for in that case she

might have been blind to her faults, which she was not. She knew them well, and knew, too, the perils to which they would be only too likely to expose her. For Susan was well acquainted with the temptations of life, though she had never been herself exposed to them, and a child of Light herself (though her angelic plumage was of a very common sort, with no gilt edges to the tips of the feathers), she had the wisdom of a child of this world. Her eyes had been by no means closed to Lucy's 'goings on' while she had been under her roof. She felt, while there was at present no harm in the girl, that she had some dangerous characteristics—vanity, ambition, and (what might be worse than all) an overweening confidence in her own resources.

'I can take care of myself, aunt,' had been Lucy's curt rejoinder on one or two occasions, when certain visitors had called to see Lucy of whom Susan did not approve. They were persons in the music-hall and small theatrical line of business, who having heard her singing and seen

her beauty, had obtained introductions to her (we can scarcely say '*Heaven* knows how'), and had attempted to secure her as an attraction for their establishments. Their offers had seemed glittering, by contrast to the stipend which Lucy derived from her present engagement at St. Ethelburga's, but hitherto she had resisted them. Her good sense had told her that to be even the first singing chambermaid at the Thespis, or to be advertised as the 'Great Vocal' at the Elysian Shades, would not have helped her on the road to be the wife of Richard Talbot, though she (erroneously) believed that a similar position in a higher scenic sphere would have done so.

But now that Richard was given up, she felt no longer so fastidious ; she was as fixed as ever upon getting to the top of the theatrical tree, but she no longer shrunk from setting foot on these low rungs of the ladder. Susan knew nothing of the reasons of Lucy's change of purpose ; indeed she thought it arose simply from her desire

for independence, and unwillingness to be a burden upon her own scanty resources ; but she was now in possession of the fact that the girl meant to go upon the stage, and the knowledge filled her with distress and horror.

She had never herself been within the walls of a playhouse ; but had she been a Puritan (which she was not) she could not have entertained a greater aversion for such establishments. She knew what had come of frequenting the Elysian Shades in certain cases within her own experience ; and that no similar catastrophe should happen to Lucy, God willing (as how should He not be ?), this good little creature had made up her mind. She had told Sister Edith that she intended that very day to put a certain plan of hers into effect that had this end in view ; but she was, in fact, somewhat doubtful as to how to proceed in the matter, or rather in what direction to take the first step. A circumstance, however, occurred that very afternoon, which decided her. On entering the upstairs sitting-room, a

few minutes after Miss Talbot's departure, she discovered Lucy in the act of writing a letter, which the girl at once folded up and put in her pocket. Susan made no remark upon the action, but her quick eyes fell upon an envelope already addressed, and which the girl had omitted to remove from the table. This told her all she needed for her purpose.

In the evening, after tea, Susan went out. It was not unusual for her to do so, for she had often to go upon little errands of charity, upon Miss Talbot's account, to the poor people in the neighbourhood. Her absence, therefore, excited no surprise in her niece and sister-in-law. The fact of it being a wet night would, under ordinary circumstances, have made no sort of difference, for Susan was accustomed to go out in all weathers; but in the present instance this circumstance did somewhat affect her, for she carried with her a precious something under her shawl, which caused her no little solicitude lest it should suffer damage. In the little sitting-room there remained

her flute-case as usual, except that the lid was locked ; otherwise, whoever had opened it would have discovered that the casket had lost its jewel ; for the first time in her life Susan Parkes had gone out into the town taking her flute with her.

Through the shine and slime of the wet, gaslit streets she hurriedly made her way, till she reached a broad thoroughfare, in the centre of which, darting rays of light through the murky air like a midnight sun, stood that temple devoted professedly to Terpsichore, but also, clandestinely (for there was law against it), vowed to Thespis, called the Elysian Shades. Why 'Shades?' one might well have asked on looking at its effulgent splendours. But of such interrogatives there is no end ; some persons might have even entered, and seen all, and then inquired in all honesty, Why Elysian ? It was not until Susan came under the searching light of the gas star that hung upon the broad front of this edifice, like jewels on the brow of a stage-queen, that her eccentric appearance began to attract

attention ; it did not, however, escape the notice of the groups of the idlers who, as usual, were congregated about the entrance, the portico of which also afforded them a welcome shelter from the rain.

‘Hullo!’ said one, ‘here is a witch.’

‘Aye, and a white witch,’ added another, in reference to the tufts of grey hair which grew upon the little woman’s face, like lichen upon an old wall.

Susan, though somewhat disconcerted by these remarks, pushed her way through the mocking crowd to the box of the check-seller. ‘I wish to see Mr. Drummond upon business,’ said she.

‘You must let her through at once, Dick,’ observed one of the lively throng ; ‘it is the queen of the fairies, who is desirous of an engagement. I say, Sall, she wants your place.’

Sall, a young lady in blue satin, with an ostrich feather (broken in the back) in her scanty bonnet, laughed shrilly at this stroke of humour. She *had* been a fairy, though not the queen of them, until within the last

few nights, but had forfeited her position through an indiscreet indulgence in brandy and water before convivial hours—in other words, having become intoxicated before the ballet of fairies had been ‘called on,’ she had been dismissed by the stage manager.

‘You can’t see Mr. Drummond to-night,’ said the check-seller scornfully; ‘not if you was the Hempress of Morocco.’

‘But I *must* see him,’ urged Susan desperately; that shrill laugh had acted like a spur upon her. ‘I know Mr. Drummond, and he knows me. Please to send in this to him;’ and she handed into the pigeon-hole a slip of paper, on which was written her address.

‘We don’t do anything for nothing at this establishment,’ observed the official coldly.

Susan felt in her pockets, and, to her intense chagrin, found that she had left her purse at home. ‘I have no money, sir, but I pray you for Heaven’s sake send in my message.’

‘Oh lor, she’s no fairy, but a tragedy queen,’ ejaculated the first idler.

‘Be quiet, Tom, and let the old woman be,’ cried the shrill-voiced young lady. ‘Dick, do you send in the message; I wish it.’

‘Obey the voice of beauty,’ said Tom, ‘or I’ll never stand you a glass of gin again.’

Thus adjured, Dick said to Susan, ‘Pass on, missus;’ and at the same time admonished an attendant in scarlet to take the lady to the manager’s room. Their way lay through part of the music-hall itself, filled with a numerous audience, and bright with gold and colour. On the stage a young woman, in a garment which should have been high where it was low, and *vice versa*, was singing a ballad, the words of which did not reach Susan’s ear, whereby, to judge from the plaudits that followed every verse, she must have lost a great artistic treat; it was not from disappointment, however, that Susan groaned and clasped her hands, like one in pain: her

wrinkled face had a shuddering fear in it, and in her bright eyes might have been read a sort of frenzied terror. Fortunately the attention of the company was too much engrossed for them to notice her, and presently her guide lifted a curtain which opened on a passage, at the end of which was a door with a ground-glass pane, on which was inscribed, 'Manager's Room.'

Susan had recovered the slip of paper whereon her address was written, and which, perhaps, would have availed her but little. Mr. Drummond might have been led to admit her to his presence from the fact of her being under the same roof as Lucy, but that might also have affected him the other way. His views had already met with opposition from her ; indeed, she had spoken very plainly to him on the only occasion that he had paid a visit to Ford's Alley. She had told him that no effort of hers should be wanting to persuade Lucy to reject his proposition that she should sing at 'The Shades,' and had even expressed a very decided (and antagonistic)

opinion upon the character of that establishment.

Upon the whole, it was well for her scheme, perhaps, that the Peri in blue satin had taken her part, and got the gate of this earthly paradise open for her. Her guide took no more upon him than to point to the manager's door, and then left her to introduce herself—which were his orders in such cases, Mr. Drummond's visitors upon business being sometimes unwilling to have their names divulged to more persons than necessary.

Susan knocked boldly, and in answer to a gruff 'Come in' from the tenant of the apartment, entered it. It was a snug room enough, but very far from being a neat one. On a large velvet sofa were heaped various kinds of fanciful costumes; on the table were strewed bright little swords, and wreaths, and flags, and fans; on the floor were various other articles of ornamental appearance, but as even Susan could understand, of slight intrinsic worth. The owner of these 'properties' was himself attired in

a costume that belonged, at least in part, to the stage. He wore tight-fitting black pantaloons, terminating in silk stockings and buckled shoes; while a gorgeous flowered dressing-gown concealed the rest of his ample proportions. An active figure was Mr. Drummond's still, notwithstanding his tendency to 'adipose deposit,' or, as the vulgar call it, 'fat,' and considering that he was also at least fifty years of age. His face was lined rather than wrinkled; he had a close-cropped head and that blue-black look of the cheeks peculiar to actors off the stage; but he would have been well-looking enough had it not been for the somewhat cynical expression and want of vivacity in his keen grey eyes.

'Well, madam—your business? I need not ask who you are,' said he coarsely. This allusion to the poor woman's personal appearance, which once seen was not indeed likely to be forgotten, would have been unpardonable in a baboon. But then no baboon had had Mr. Drummond's experience; he honestly believed that Susan's

objections to her niece's joining his 'company' were mercenary, and that she had now come to him to drive a bargain.

'My business is concerning my niece, Lucy Lindon; you have had a letter from her, I believe?'

'Of course I have. Why not say you know it at once, and the contents of it.'

'I do not know the contents of it; but I guess that she has agreed to sing on your stage for money.'

'She does not propose to do so for love, begad! if you mean that. I am sure I am telling you no secret when I say she wants three pounds a week. Did you ever hear of such extortion? Three pounds a week for a novice, whose voice has never been tried except in a church choir. Perhaps, however,' he added with a sneer, 'you are come here to propose some abatement in the terms.'

'I think the terms are high,' said Susan gravely. 'You would never give that money for her voice, Mr. Drummond. You believe that her beauty will attract your

audience. It is a cruel gift for a poor girl to possess.'

'Ah, you are doubtless thankful that Providence has not conferred it upon yourself; on the other hand, you have your advantages, let me tell you.'

'You mean that I am ugly enough for a show,' said Susan simply. 'That is just what I am come about.'

'What! you are seeking an engagement? Johnny, Johnny, come here.' And Mr. Drummond threw himself into an arm-chair in an ecstasy, and laughed uproariously.

An inner door was pushed open, and a wonderful vision presented itself. A very tall, thin woman, with fine features and speaking eyes, came noiselessly into the room. She was attired—if you could call her so—in what looked like webs of gossamer. Some tight-fitting delicate substance, giving the idea of being transparent, if it was not actually so, and powdered with gold.

This was Joanna, Mrs. Drummond, in

her celebrated (dumb) impersonation of Titania, Queen of the Fairies.

To say that Susan was shocked, is very inadequately to describe her feelings; she was astounded.

‘What *is* the matter, James?’

‘Matter? Here is an addition to the company. I thought I would let you see her, for fear you should be jealous of our *tête-à-tête*.’

‘A fortune-teller, a witch, a malignant fairy,’ observed Johnny, regarding Susan with critical eyes; ‘she would be worth a pound a week if the season were beginning. As it is, however, we have no part for her. Have you ever played before, my good woman?’

‘Only on this, ma’am.’ Susan dropped her shawl, and brought out her flute. ‘Are you judges of music?’

Mr. Drummond smiled like Mephistopheles. ‘Are we judges of music? Well, one of us is, perhaps. Oh lor, I wish we could put this upon the stage.’

Susan put her flute to her lips, and executed a lively air.

The manager listened with his head aside, at first comically, then critically, and at last with manifest approval. He kept time to the music with his head, and after a while Titania began to move in graceful circles—the very melody personified.

‘Thirty shillings a week and dresses provided,’ murmured she breathlessly, as the tune came to an end.

‘Don’t let us go too fast,’ observed her husband reprovingly. ‘Perhaps our friend is like the silent parrot, who said, “I think the more.” She may not be able to play anything else.’

‘Try me,’ said the performer, with quiet scorn. If there ever was a woman without vanity it was Susan Parkes ; but then probably there never was. If Susan was not proud of her flute-playing, she had, at all events, a just confidence in her skill. Again she set her lips to the fine instrument, and this time they evoked a strain so grave, yet so tender, it was as though a window in heaven had opened, and some serene face full of divine pity was looking down on the struggles of men.

During this harmony Titania yawned, for she cared for no music that was not addressed to her feet ; but her husband listened with great attention. His heart was not touched, or if it was he was unaware of it, for it was no longer tender ; but he had an appreciative ear.

‘ You are a oner, Miss Parkes, and that’s a fact,’ said he, with a clap of his large hands, when she had come to the end of her tune. ‘ But you are more fit for St. Ethelburga’s than for us—though I grant that your appearance would be “fetching.” Why not change places with your niece ; let *her* come here——’

‘ Never,’ interrupted Susan emphatically. ‘ Mrs. Drummond, I appeal to you, as a woman to a woman.’

Titania, who had been admiring her own ankles, looked up superciliously ; she thought it rather a liberty in this frightful little creature to claim to belong to the same sex as her fair self.

‘ Your husband is endeavouring to tempt a very vain and beautiful girl, who at

present is as pure as a snow-drift, to join this establishment. I propose myself as a substitute on her terms.'

'A dancer?' exclaimed Joanna, turning upon her lord and master with sudden vehemence.

'No, dear, of course not. Not that it would have affected you in the least even if she had been. You are unapproachable.'

This was not the view generally taken of Titania's character, and coming from her husband, it was therefore all the more gratifying and satisfactory. He intended his remark, however, only to apply to her position as *première danseuse*. 'The young lady in question is a singer.'

'It seems, however, that she is very beautiful,' observed Joanna.

'That is what her relative says,' returned her husband. 'With some people all their own geese are swans.'

'I have Lucy's photograph in my pocket,' said Susan, and she whipped it out, and placed it in Mrs. Drummond's hand.

In this the good woman showed her

wisdom, though she was, as it happened, acting on fallacious grounds. Her idea was that Mrs. Drummond's jealousy would be excited at the idea of her husband's laying siege to so beautiful a creature as Lucy. Whereas the lady was altogether above, or below, such conventional feelings. Moreover, it must be added, in justice to the manager, that he cared no more for *prima donnas* and *danseuses* in the way of gallantry, than a grocer's boy, after a six months' apprenticeship, cares for treacle. Where Susan's argument touched Joanna, was in the matter of stage competition; she could bear no rival near her throne. She was bordering upon thirty years of age, and even owned to twenty-four: and this picture showed the face of a young girl of exquisite beauty. The attraction of her own gossamer attire and twinkling feet would not, it was true, be directly endangered by the engagement of this wonder; but what a blow it would be if any considerable part of the audience should come to hear this pretty young

person sing, and then go away again before the ballet, depriving her of her own legitimate audience.

‘I think, Mr. Drummond,’ said she, speaking with great distinctness, ‘that this good lady here, with her flute-playing and—general appearance, is likely to prove a greater attraction to the ‘Shades’ than this young person, even if her voice should be equal to her personal charms.’

The manager sighed and murmured, ‘They are all alike.’

‘That is true,’ said Joanna, wilfully misunderstanding his allusion, which, I am afraid, had reference to the jealousy of womankind. ‘One girl is like another, but here we have a wonder in its way;’ and she looked at Susan with admiration. ‘We must give her an appropriate title on the bills, of course. You are not particular, I suppose, about going under your own name, madam?’

‘No indeed, ma’am; I would much rather go under some other,’ said poor Susan, who, now that her self-sacrifice was concluded,

began to feel the full extent of it. She pictured to herself the horror of appearing on that glaring stage, with a thousand eyes fixed upon her with contemptuous ridicule.

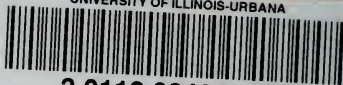
‘Of course, she must have a good name,’ said the manager crossly—‘the Harmonious Dwarf from the Hartz Mountains, or something of that sort; but there will be plenty of time to think about that. We must give the long-haired negress a month’s notice before we get a vacancy. It was always a nuisance, letting people come on the stage to pull her hair and convince themselves it was genuine, and there’s not so much of it as there was in consequence. And then, ma’am, you shall have the three pounds a week that Miss Lindon asks for.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Susan humbly. She bowed and withdrew, making her way back through the music-hall with even more alarm than when she came, for the noisy throng had now a more personal significance for her: in a few weeks she herself, and her frightfulness, and her flute, would be the very cynosure of it for at least some

dreadful minutes every night. She wondered at her own courage that had brought this terrible preferment upon her, even though it was for Lucy's sake ; yet felt it better that she should be made a laughing-stock, and her skill be mocked at by the ignorant crowd, than that her niece should be exposed to peril. There would be no excuse for Lucy's going upon the stage now upon the score of necessity, since she had found a substitute.

END OF VOL. II.

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